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ABSTRACT

A study examined the personal, social, and political functions that underlie the reading and writing that young children do about themselves, their families and communities, and their culture. Subjects, five third-grade children attending an inner-city elementary school, participated in an alternative language arts program involving independent self-selected reading of trade books, keeping reader response journals, sharing reading and discussion of self-selected and assigned books and stories, writing about their families, community, and culture, and sharing their writing with their peers. Working as participant-observers, two researchers visited the classroom 5 days a month for 7 months. Five students, whose reading and writing embodied a wide range of personal, social, and political functions, were selected for case study. Subjects were interviewed bi-weekly, and their written work was collected. Results indicated that: (1) the subjects used reading and writing for a range of personal, social, and political functions; (2) multiple functions were often associated with a single book or written piece; (3) the functions were frequently intertwined in mutually supportive ways; (4) the overwhelming proportion of children's reading and writing functioned in personal ways; and (5) subjects' reading and writing functioned in social and political ways, helping them to affirm or transform social relationships in their immediate worlds. Findings suggest that reading and writing are often used by children not only to construct textual meaning but also to construct themselves. (A table of data is included; 24 references and the coding scheme for reading and writing functions are attached.) (RS)

# The Personal, Social, and Political Functions of Young Children's Reading and Writing

A paper presented at the 41st National Reading Conference

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# THE PERSONAL, SOCIAL, AND POLITICAL FUNCTIONS OF YOUNG CHILDREN'S READING AND WRITING

## Background and Purpose

This study examines the personal, social, and political functions that underlie and motivate the self-selected reading and writing of young children. An underlying assumption of this work is that it is important to understand how children connect learning to read and write with learning to make sense of and negotiate human experience. Such knowledge would not only extend our understanding of the possible functions of the reading writing engaged in by children, it would also provide valuable information about ways that educators might make language arts instruction more personally meaningful, culturally relevant, and motivating.

Drawing primarily on the work of Sapir (1921) and Jakobson (1960), a number of literacy researchers have focused on children's exploitation of the rhetorical possibilities of written language. In their pioneering work, Britton (1970; 1982) and Britton, Burgess, Martin, McLeod, and Rosen (1975) found that writing was employed to accomplish three basic rhetorical functions: expressive, transactional, and poetic. The most basic function and the earliest to develop was the expressive function. Both transactional language and poetic language evolved from or grew out of expressive language.

Since the work of Britton and his colleagues, many researchers have employed, criticized, and extended their theoretical scheme of writing functions. In addition to the expressive, transactional, and poetic functions, children have been reported to use writing for a variety of other purposes some of which were to experiment with the styles of particular authors or genres (e.g., Gundlach, 1981; Whale & Robinson, 1978), to frame or mark an event to make it more important or business-like (e.g., Fiering, 1981;

Shuman, 1986), to control public interaction in order to get the floor, make a public statement, or control access to events (e.g., Fiering, 1981; Shuman, 1986), to substitute for oral messages either because of the absence of a receiver, prohibitions against oral transmission, or embarrassment involved in oral transmission (e.g., Fiering, 1981; Litowitz & Gundlach, 1985; Shuman, 1986), and to affirm one's identity, one's sense of personal history, or attributive propositions about one's self (e.g., Clark & Florio, 1982; Dyson, 1988, 1989; Litowitz & Gundlach, 1985; Newkirk, 1989; Shuman, 1986).

While these studies have clearly demonstrated that children and adolescents use writing for a variety of purposes that far exceed those initially proposed by Britton and his colleagues, they have not formally addressed the core possibilities that writing or reading offers for understanding or transforming human experience.

Despite the absence of empirical work in this area, there is a wealth of theoretical literature to support explorations of this sort. Britton (1982), for example, has suggested that written language can be a vehicle for reconstructing and shaping experience. Similarly, Bruner (1990) has proposed that the stories we read or compose "mediate between the canonical world of culture and the more idiosyncratic world of beliefs, desires, and hopes" (p. 52). In addition, a number of theorists from within the growing field of critical literacy have emphasized that literacy is not only the ability to understand or construct the conceptual meaning of written texts, but also the means through which individuals' understanding of themselves and their relationships to the world are progressively enlarged (e.g., Ferdman, 1990; Freire & Macedo, 1987; Gee, 1990; Giroux, 1988; Scollon, 1988; Willinsky, 1990). Grounded in these theoretical perspectives, the primary purpose of this study was to understand and describe the nature of the personal, social, and political

functions that underlie the reading and writing that young children do about themselves, their families and communities, and their culture.

## Method

### Students and the classroom context

The participants in the study were five third-grade children attending in an inner-city elementary school. The K-5 school drew its students from the surrounding neighborhood -- a community rich in African-American culture with strong ties to the auto industry. As part of the study, we worked with a classroom teacher from the school to develop and implement an alternative language arts program that involved children in reading and writing about themselves, their families, and their communities. Within this program, children often engaged in the following activities: independent self-selected reading of trade books, keeping journals of responses to their reading, shared reading and discussion of self-selected and assigned books or stories, writing about their families, communities and culture, sharing their writing with peers, participating in peer editing groups, and publishing a monthly in-class "magazine" and a year-end anthology of their writing. In addition, at the beginning of the year, children planned and video taped a neighborhood tour during which they offered commentary about a variety of local landmarks that had particular meaning for them. Many of these landmarks became the subject of children's early writing about themselves, their community, and their culture. In addition to these activities, the teacher also spent a portion of each day focusing on activities normally associated with basal reading and the language arts program adopted by the school district (e.g., grammar lessons, handwriting practice, vocabulary instruction, and spelling).

Data Collection

Working as a participant-observers, two researchers visited in the classroom five days a month from November to May. During this time, we observed and took part in shared reading activities, individual and collaborative writing sessions, and peer editing sessions. We also collected and made copies of the written work (stories, poems, essays, etc.) and the response logs of all students in the classroom. Finally, we chose five children for case study analysis. These five children were selected because, based on the reading and writing that they did early in the year, their work embodied a wide range of the personal, social, and political functions evident in the reading and writing practiced in the classroom as a whole.

We conducted extensive interviews with these case-study children on a bi-weekly basis, beginning on the fifth week of the study and continuing throughout the remainder of the school year. Interview questions were designed to elicit information regarding the ways in which specific texts that children read or wrote functioned in their lives. During each interview, children were first asked to review the reading and writing in which they had engaged since the previous interview and to identify those books or "stories" that they wished to talk about. Copies of children's written texts and their reading response logs served as reminders of previous reading and writing that had taken place.

Data Transcription, Coding, and Analysis

Children's interviews were transcribed. Using the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), a coding scheme was developed to identify the personal, social, and political functions found to underlie children's reading and writing (Kamberelis & McGinley, 1991, see Appendix A). The unit of analysis used for coding the transcripts consisted of a comment about a

particular function that children assigned to a text that they had read or written. These comments ranged in length from a few words to a few sentences. Multiple comments that were associated with a single function for a given text (i.e., book or students composition) were coded as a single comment. For example, if a child made several similar comments over the course of an interview about a particular piece of writing or book and each comment was associated with the same function, that function was coded as having occurred only once. In instances where the same function was reflected in several different comments but in reference to multiple topics or foci related to the same book or composition, the function was coded as having occurred more than once. All interview transcripts were coded using this scheme. Twenty-five percent of the interview transcripts were coded independently by two researchers. Interrater agreement was 92%. Disagreements were resolved by consensus. Coded interviews were analyzed descriptively for the proportions of different functions children assigned to their reading and writing.

## Results

### The Functions of Reading and Writing

Interview transcripts from case-study children contained a total of 341 comments associated with reading and writing functions. Table 1 provides information on the distribution of children's comments about various reading and writing functions. As the table indicates, children engaged in reading and writing activities that allowed them to explore personal, social, and political meanings. The overwhelming proportion of children's reading and writing was centered around personal functions (73.6%), helping them to understand themselves, their problems, and their futures. The remaining proportion of children's reading and writing was associated with social

functions (16.1%) such as affirming or transforming social relationships in their immediate worlds. Finally, children's reading and writing was associated with political functions (10.3%), helping them to understand or transform social problems and injustices.

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Insert Table 1 here

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A summary of the distribution of specific functions found to underlie children's reading and writing is also presented in Table 1. The most commonly occurring functions are discussed below along with excerpts from children's interview transcripts that serve to illustrate how children conceived of these functions. As the table indicates, the largest proportion of the reading and writing in which children engaged was associated with envisioning, exploring, or celebrating possible selves or role models (15.8%). One child named James, for example, explained how three particular books that he had read, *The Story of Martin*, *Encyclopedia Brown Gets His Man*, and *Abraham Lincoln*, functioned to help him envision possible roles for himself

> [I liked to reading these books because] it makes me think that I want to, that I could help the community or go up in space or be a actor or have all three. I have three choices to choose from, helping the community, going up in space, or bring an actor. . . See, if I think about my life, I only think about being an actor, but if I read Encyclopedia Brown or a book about Martin Luther King or Abraham Lincoln, then it helps me to think about different things instead of being an actor.

Reading functioned in a similar way for Tanya as her comments about the book entitled *Diana Ross Star Supreme* illustrated:

> [When I read *Diana Ross Star Supreme*] It made me feel happy because I like the way she sings. . . I think famous people were very special because um, some famous people helped others be famous and some famous people just made me feel happy. . . When I was seven my mother said she wanted to put me in like a singing class and a dance class. . . And like Martin Luther King, I think he was a good man and like when I grow up, I'll probably be a singer or a preacher or somebody like Dr. Martin Luther King or Diana Ross.

The second largest proportion of children's reading and writing was associated with personal enjoyment or entertainment (15.2%). In response to reading *The Town and the Country Mouse,* a book that he was most anxious to share with other members of his class, Ricardo elaborated on this function:

> I liked it. It was exciting. . . First they went to this house, and the town mouse asked did he have something to eat? So he said let's go over to the cow, he said what's the cow gonna do for lunch? He said we could drink milk for lunch. And then they went to the pig, he said what the pig got for lunch. . . It was fun.

The third largest proportion of children's reading and writing was connected with helping them to remember or savor personal experiences or interests (10.6%). The presence of this function was most apparent in Ricardo's remarks about a piece that he wrote entitled *My Life,* a story about his own life and the memory of his relationship with his great grandfather:

> [I wrote this] because I was thinking about my life and stuff. . . And I thin': about how my grandfather did stuff with me. I wanted to tell about how he did things with me. . . My great grandfather sometimes he came and picked me up from school when I was little. And so when I write, it makes me think about him.

Tanya's remarks about the book called *Lulu Goes to Witch School*, which conjured up memories of her earliest days in school, also illustrated this function:

> When I first read the first part of the book, it was talking about Lulu going to school and I predict, I said in my mind that this might be how my life was when I first came to school. . . And as I read on, it kept talking about how I was when I first came to school. And then it came to the part where Mary came to school and I started thinking on her. And then I went on and on, and then we started being friends.

Children's also discussed using reading and writing as a vehicle for objectifying or reconciling problematic emotions (8.5%). In relation to this point, James provided insight into how he used writing to deal with thoughts and feelings about encountering homeless people in his own community. As he talked about his essay, *Poor People*, James explained:

> I see a lot of poor people when I walk down the street. Sometimes I see them when I walk to school or I'm going to my friends house. . . When I wrote about poor people it helps me to release my feelings 'cause I feel sorry for a poor person it helps me to feel better if I write about it.

While children's reading and writing was most frequently associated with more personal functions, they also enacted a number of social and political functions that seemed particularly important to their development both as writers and as members of the wider society. In particular, children used their reading and writing to affirm or transform their relationships in the immediate social worlds (7.6%). For example, in relation to his essay, *Black Americans*, Billy's interview comments revealed how his writing functioned to help him affiliate with family members who valued and frequently discussed the lives and accomplishments of important African-Americans:

> [I like to write about Black Americans] 'cause my mom met Rosa Parks and my grandfather he met Martin Luther King, and my dad tell me a story about Malcolm X. . . and then my dad, and my momma, and my grandfather met Martin Luther King. And then, when my grandfather, he travels a lot, he went to Atlanta, Georgia, and then he put some sunflowers on his grave.

Similarly, comments from James' interview about the book *Manic McGee,* illustrated how he used writing to reflect upon the love he felt for his parents:

> Umm, in this story his parents died. And I think about what it would be like if my parents had died when I was four, when me and my brother was four, and then I'm thankful that my parents didn't die.

Children also associated their reading and writing with increasing their awareness or understanding of social problems and social injustices (6.5%). In response to reading *I Have a Dream,* a book about the life of Martin Luther King, Jr., James' told us about how he found the book meaningful because it raised his awareness of the causes of racial conflict and racial problems:

> Deanne [a classmate and friend] read this book, *I Have a Dream,* and I found it interesting because it had a lot of things that I never knew about Dr. Martin Luther King 'cause he had two white friends and their mother told them they couldn't see him (Martin) anymore 'cause he was Black and they was White. . . And he (Martin Luther King Sr.) needed to buy his son some shoes but then the clerk came in front of them and told them they need to sit in the back of the room and he got angry and left. . . Black people when they were in that time they weren't treated right.

In addition to using literacy to raise their own awareness of social injustice, children also used their writing, in particular, to transform other people's

values and beliefs about social problems (3.8%). James, for example, explained how his essay, *Poor People* functioned as a vehicle through which he might transform the values and attitudes of other people with regard to poverty and homelessness:

> I would like other people to think about, I would like them to like it [the essay]. And I wish that it would change in their lives and make it that they would help out poor people. Maybe they would have a change of heart. . . That it would be right to help a poor person. 'Cause if you write something, and you really put your mind to it, and it's about something that happens everyday, somebody might have a change of heart.

Finally, children's reading and writing was sometimes associated with helping them to envision or forge a moral code for themselves (3.5%). This function was illustrated quite aptly by Tanya as she discussed her essay, *Non Violence*, explaining how writing and rereading this essay had helped her to develop her attitudes about violence and non-violence:

> Like when I wrote this story and everything and I re-read and I re-read, and re-read it so I get across, so I get the feeling not to do violence when I grow up, or not to be and when I see people doing, being violent to others, try to stop 'em or something if I can.

Similarly, comments from Edward's interview about the book called *Soccer Practice*, illustrated how he used reading to develop and affirm his beliefs about the importance of being truthful with others:

> [When I read this book] It made me feel mad that he [the character named Alex] lied, 'cause if you lie, then I don't like that. I don't need that. I always try to tell the truth. . . It helped me think about how all people should not tell stories. I mean not stories but the truth.

## Discussion

Gathering together the findings from analyses of these five case-study children, it is apparent that they used reading and writing for a range personal, social, and political functions. Moreover, multiple functions were often associated with a single book or written piece. Finally, while the personal, social, and political functions of literacy were often discussed as independent functional domains, in practice, they were frequently intertwined in mutually supportive ways.

Results from this study revealed that the overwhelming proportion of children's reading and writing functioned in personal ways, helping them to understand their present selves, their problems, and their futures. More specifically, children's reading and writing served as a vehicle for exploring possible selves and identifying with role models, providing personal enjoyment and entertainment, savoring past experiences, and objectifying and reconciling problematic emotions. These findings are congruent with previous work in this area (e.g., Britton, 1970; Clark & Florio, 1982; Dyson, 1989; Gundlach, 1981; Newkirk, 1989).

Results also demonstrated that children's reading and writing functioned in more social and political ways, helping them to affirm or transform social relationships in their immediate worlds, and to understand and consider possibilities for transforming social problems and injustices. While some of these social and political functions have been reported in previous studies (e.g., Fiering, 1981; Litowitz & Gundlach, 1985; Shuman, 1986), others have gone largely unnoticed. For example, no other studies of which we are aware have reported children using reading and writing to forge a moral code for themselves, to self-consciously celebrate literate values,

to raise their awareness of social problems and injustices, and to transform other people's values and beliefs about such problems.

Although the social and political functions that were found to underlie and motivate children's reading and writing in the present study did not occur with great frequency, together with the more personal functions, they seemed to reflect the extent to which children can and do use literacy to construct and transform both their lives and their worlds. This was illustrated, for example, in Tanya's's use of writing to forge a moral code about violence and non-violence, as well as James' use of writing to alert people about poverty and homelessness in his own community.

In sum, results from this study have a number of implications both for understanding the nature of children's literacy development, as well as for literacy pedagogy. Given the opportunity, children can and do use reading and writing to reflect upon and enact the forms and standards of personal and community life that they find possible and desirable. Thus reading and writing are often used by children not only to construct textual meaning but also, and perhaps more importantly, to construct themselves.

The many personal, social, and political functions of literacy demonstrated by children in this study has important implications for reading and writing pedagogy. In particular, they underscore the importance of developing language arts programs that are personally meaningful, culturally relevant, and motivating. Indeed, we believe that providing occasions for the children in this study to read and write about themselves, their families, their communities, and their culture contributed significantly to the wide range of literate functions they explored. In relation to this point, it may be that language arts instruction that focuses primarily on the acquisition and production of textual meaning may deny children access to

significant dimensions and consequences of learning to read and write. These dimensions and consequences are implicit in many of the literate functions discovered in this study and involve using reading and writing to understand and negotiate human experience, as well as to transform their lives and their worlds. These uses of reading and writing suggest the need to expand our notions of "response to literature" to include the perspectives children bring to literature from their "lived worlds" and everyday ways of using language, as well as how experiences with literature might transform those worlds and "ways with words."

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Table 1
Summary of Specific Reading and Writing Functions
Percent of Total Interview Comments Associated with Functions

| Functions | Reading Writing% | (N) |
|---|---|---|
| Personal (Total) | 73.6% | 251 |
| Social (Total) | 16.1% | 55 |
| Political (Total) | 10.3% | 35 |
| Envision, explore, celebrate possible selves or role models (Personal) | 15.8% | 54 |
| Provide personal enjoyment/entertainment (Personal) | 15.2% | 52 |
| Remember or savor personal experiences/interests (Personal) | 10.6% | 36 |
| Objectify/reconcile problematic emotions (Personal) | 8.5% | 29 |
| Affirm/transform relationships in one's social world (Social) | 7.6% | 26 |
| To self-consciously enact/celebrate literate values/practices (Personal) | 6.7% | 23 |
| Understand/raise awareness of social problems and injustices (Political) | 6.5% | 22 |
| Experience, participate in imaginary worlds/lives (Personal) | 4.7% | 16 |
| Transform people's values/beliefs about social problems (Political) | 3.8% | 13 |
| To forge or envision a moral code for one's self (Political) | 3.5% | 12 |
| Learn more about personal interests (Personal) | 2.9% | 10 |
| Envision possible events to mitigate present problems (Personal) | 2.9% | 10 |
| Provide others with knowledge/ new ways of seeing the world (Social) | 2.3% | 8 |
| Importance of reciprocating within personal relationships (Social) | 2.1% | 7 |
| Provide enjoyment/entertainment to others (Social) | 1.5% | 5 |
| Assist others in remembering personal experiences (Social) | 1.5% | 5 |
| Share common experiences that strengthen or mobilize others (Social) | 1.2% | 4 |
| Express/objectify personal needs or desires (Personal) | 1.2% | 4 |
| Express ideas difficult to express in speech (Personal) | 1.2% | 4 |
| Enlist other's help in understanding problems/emotions (Personal) | 0.3% | 1 |
| TOTAL | 100% | 341 |

## Appendix A
## Scheme for Coding the Personal, Social, and Political Functions of Reading and Writing

**I. Personal**

**Present Recreational Function:**

- To provide personal enjoyment, entertainment, and new ways of seeing the world for one's self
- To describe, remember, and/or savor personal experiences and/or interests (also to anticipate future experiences and events)
- To experience, participate in imagined/imaginary worlds or imagined/imaginary lives of fictional characters (subsumes personal enjoyment and entertainment)
- To learn more about and develop personal interests or hobbies

**Functions Directed Toward Present Problems**

- To express or objectify personal needs or desires
- To objectify, understand, reconcile, or perhaps purge problematic emotions regarding self and/or personal relationships in and out of school (usually difficult to accomplish through speech)
- To express ideas that are difficult to express in speech
- To envision future events and possible lives in order to mitigate present problems or circumstances for oneself
- To enlist the help of others in understanding and dealing with personal experiences and problematic emotional states

**Functions Related to Possible Selves**

- To envision, explore, celebrate possible selves or role models from real life or literature (e.g., future roles, responsibilities, aspirations for one's self, sometimes in relation to role models)
- To self-consciously enact and celebrate literate attitudes, values, and practices (e.g., to celebrate one's role/identity as an author or literate person; to acknowledge the role of reading as a source of information for future writing)

**II. Social Relationships**

**Functions Related to Celebrating and Transforming Social Relationships**

- To provide enjoyment and entertainment for others
- To invite or encourage others to describe, remember, and/or savor personal experiences and/or interests (also to anticipate future experiences and events)
- To establish, celebrate, transform relationships/roles with people in one's immediate social world or to celebrate membership and affiliation with particular social/cultural groups (e.g., family, peers)
- To inform others about the importance of developing and reciprocating within personal relationships in one's life.
- To provide others with knowledge and new ways of seeing the world
- To share information and experience designed to help other people deal with problematics emotions and events involving social relationships in their life

**III. Political: Social Problems and Social Action**

**Functions related to Social Problems and Social Action**

- To become aware of, understand, or make others aware of social problems and social injustices (e.g., racism, poverty, homelessness, violence, enviroment, drug abuse)
- To transform other people's values, attitudes, beliefs, with respect to social problems (e.g., racism, poverty, homelessness, violence, enviroment, drug abuse, or ways of perceiving the world)
- To begin to forge a moral code for one's self. May involve envisioning possibilities for social action and citizenship.