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Maniac Magee and Ragtime Tumpie: Children Negotiating Self and World Through Reading and Writing

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This article reports results from a year-long study of the specific ways that children's literacy practices enhanced their understanding of themselves and their social worlds in a classroom where they were encouraged to read, write, and talk about personally and socially relevant subjects. Throughout the school year the researchers documented the nature of classroom activities and the ways that they were taken up by children in their reading and writing practices. In response to various classroom activities and in relation to many out-of-school experiences, children's reading and writing were found to function for them in a variety of personal and social ways, enabling them to understand the complex urban landscape they inhabited, to explore new roles and social identities, to wrestle with vexing social problems, and to envision ways of reconstructing their lives and their worlds. The strengths and limitations of this particular integration of action research and critical literacy are also discussed.

Literacy researchers have often stressed the important roles that reading and writing can play in helping students understand themselves or explore human experience. In research on writing, Dyson (1989) argued that understanding children's written language growth involves examining the ways that learning how to read and write offer children new possibilities for exploring themselves and the world in which they live. Similarly, in a critique of research on students' responses to literature, Beach and Hynds (1991) noted that studies of students' responses to literature need to move beyond mere descriptions of global kinds of responses or literary processes "to consider the purposes underlying various response types" as well as the "meaning-making processes in which readers engage" (p. 480). Such studies, they added, would provide insights into how readers engaged texts as a way of understanding their own personal experiences, as well as the experiences and behaviors of others. The present study sought to explore specific ways children used reading and writing for these purposes.

Theoretical Background

Interest in theories about the potential of narratives to function as a way of understanding one's own and others' experiences appears in the work of numerous scholars in both the humanities and the social sciences (e.g., Booth, 1988; Bruner, 1986; Ricoeur, 1984; Witherall & Noddings, 1991). In general, these scholars have argued that because narratives are organized around the dimension of time in lived experience, they allow us to interpret our pasts, envision our futures, and understand the lives of others with whom we interact. In contrasting narrative understanding with paradigmatic understanding, Bruner (1986) argued that the latter cannot account for the vicissitudes of human experience—the uncertainty and mutability of human desires, goals, and social conduct in a manner that is unique to narrative thought. Drawing upon the work of Greimas and Courtes (1976), Bruner explained that the imaginative use of the narrative form in literature engages readers in the exploration of human possibilities by situating them simultaneously in a “dual landscape” of both action and consciousness. Stories, he explained, locate readers in a particular pattern or “grammar” of events, situations, and goals while also revealing the subjective worlds of characters who are involved in such events. In this way, stories provide “map[s] of possible roles and possible worlds in which action, thought, and self determination are permissible or desirable” (p. 66).

Other scholars have focused on the ethical value of reading literature and the influence that stories may have on the development of an individual's character or self. Coles (1989), for example, developed the idea that stories achieve their particular force through characters and events that engage readers in a psychological or moral journey. Such a journey allows readers to explore life's contingencies and dilemmas, and in so doing, enables them to “take matters of choice and commitment more seriously than they might otherwise have done” (p. 90). According to MacIntyre (1981), people's understanding of society is a function of the repertoire of stories that they have read, heard, and inherited over the course of their lives. These stories constitute the “dramatic resources” that individuals use in constructing their own moralities and evaluating the moralities of others. Therefore, depriving children of stories of social traditions and moral life “leave[s] them unscripted, anxious stutterers in their actions as in their words” (p. 201). Nussbaum (1991) expressed a similar concern regarding the role of literature in public life. In contrasting the vision of the world embodied in literary texts with that embodied in the texts of the political economy, she argued that the novel is a “morally controversial form” that provides readers with other ways of imag-

ining and participating in the public sphere. More specifically, she emphasized the important role that literature plays in the development of the literary imagination, thus nourishing a certain construal of the world that enables us to contemplate possibilities for human life and choice in ways not previously imagined.

The personal, social, and moral functions of stories (or literature more broadly conceived) have also been a central focus within reader-response theory (e.g., Beach, 1990; Hynds, 1990; Iser, 1974; Rosenblatt, 1938/1983, 1978). According to these theorists, the literary experience can function as a source of personal and social understanding that provides readers with a means to negotiate and interpret human experience.

How literature and literacy function in people's actual lives has also been the centerpiece of sociocultural theories of literacy, as in Heath's (1983) work. Parents socialize children into particular sets of community constituted practices (e.g., specific ways of reading and responding to texts) although not in any monolithic sense. Learning is inextricably linked to specific activities within specific communities of practice (e.g., reading the Bible). Within such communities, new members participate in practices from which they “pick up” the knowledge, actions, and identities requisite for fuller membership within them. This kind of socialization is not a one-way street however. The unique participation strategies of all community members not only reproduce but also change, though usually slowly and imperceptibly, the knowledges and practices of communities and cultures.

Relevant Research on Students' Writing and Reading Practices

Studies of students' writing and reading informed by one or more of the theoretical perspectives just outlined make explicit some of the relations between literacy and life that children and adolescents seem to explore through reading and writing. However, they mark a mere beginning in our understanding of these relations.

Since the pioneering work of Britton and his associates (1975), many researchers have employed, criticized, and extended their theoretical scheme of writing functions. In addition to the expressive, transactional, and poetic functions, writing has been reported to function for children in a variety of other ways. Among the most commonly documented functions of writing is to provide memory support, to help in ordering information, and to assist in organizing daily activities or personal interests (Bissex, 1980; Dyson, 1989; Newkirk, 1989). In addition to this function, several researchers have found that children engage in writing to create texts that have individual symbolic and affective significance. Such texts often allow writers to savor or recall personal experiences or events (e.g.,

Gundlach, 1981, 1982; Newkirk, 1989). Writing has also been reported to serve certain "mimetic" functions (e.g., Gundlach, 1981; Shuman, 1986; Whale & Robinson, 1978). Mimetic writing involves modeling the voices, styles, and genres characteristic of other writers. These other writers are often published authors who are admired and respected. For younger children, certain imitated styles and genres are often derived from children's stories and fairy tales. For older children and adolescents, the modeled styles and genres are often ones associated with adult roles.

Additionally, some researchers have demonstrated some of the ways in which children and adolescents use writing to establish and maintain social relationships and to assume certain positions of influence within particular social formations. They have shown that children and adolescents use writing to establish and affirm friendships (e.g., Dyson, 1989; Fishman, 1988), to influence the structure of peer group interactions (e.g., Fishman, 1988; Shuman, 1986), to mark specific ideas or events as important or business-like (e.g., Fiering, 1981; Fishman, 1988), and to control access to specific spaces or influence participation in certain activities with written messages such as "Do Not Desterb" (Bissex, 1980, p. 53) and "Would you please ask your students to stop throwing things under our door. They are bothering us." (Newkirk, 1989, p. 100).

Finally, Stotsky (1987) has shown how writing can be instrumental in helping students participate in local and national public affairs. She has documented how corresponding with media editors, government officials, community leaders, or other citizens has increased students' awareness of, participation in, and impact on ongoing public issues. Stotsky maintains that civic participation through informed writing may have powerful consequences for how students think about themselves and their relationship to the society in which they live.

With some exceptions (Dyson, 1989; Stotsky, 1987), most of these studies have been concerned with cataloguing the various functions accomplished through writing. This is clearly an important task for literacy researchers, but it is limiting in several ways. Such studies tend to ignore or downplay the role of social contexts in cueing certain writing functions. These studies also tend to isolate different functions from one another, masking their interrelations. Finally these studies tend to isolate writing from other language practices as if writing were somehow not integrally related to reading, talking, listening, or media viewing. As the work of Dyson and Stotsky suggest, more research is needed on the multiple functions of writing as they occur in relation to other language practices within complex social activities.

In the area of reading, recent interest in the transactional nature of literary understanding (e.g., Rosenblatt, 1978) has spawned two kinds of studies designed to explore the interpretative processes that underlie students' experiences with literature. One set of studies has focused on the ways in which readers evoke and draw upon personal experience to come to richer understandings of literary texts (Beach, 1990; Garrison & Hynds, 1991; Langer, 1990). Additionally, these studies have suggested that literary reading may also inform life experiences in some general way. However, they have not gone on to trace systematically any of the specific effects that literature may have had on the reader's life. A second set of studies has focused on the influence of specific instructional contexts on children's response processes (Eeds & Wells, 1989; Many, 1991; Many & Wiseman, 1992). Most notably, this research has shown that children relate literature to life more readily when encouraged to engage in aesthetic rather than efferent modes of textual transaction.

It is clearly important to understand how personal experiences enhance literary understanding and how specific instructional contexts may engender different modes of engagement with literature. However, it is also important to understand the kinds of insights about selves and worlds outside of texts that result from readers' personal evocations and reflections. Wolf and Heath (1992) devoted some attention to this dimension of reading in a study of children's literate practices outside of school, highlighting some of the ways in which two children explored and dramatized their own experiences through the lives of the characters and events they encountered through literature. We designed our present study to examine some of the effects of in-school reading and writing on one group of children's personal and social lives.

The Present Study

The purpose of the present study was to investigate some of the specific ways that the children in one classroom utilized reading and writing to reflect upon human experience in a context where they were given opportunities to read, write, and talk about themselves, their families and friends, their communities, and societal issues. Over the course of the year, we constructed detailed portraits of their engagement with reading and writing. We sought to answer the following question: In a classroom where, among other things, children were invited to read, write, and talk about personally and socially relevant topics, is there evidence that the children's literacy practices enhanced their understanding of themselves and their social worlds?

Method

Participants

Data for this study were gathered over one year in an elementary school in a major midwestern city. Although 35 children were enrolled in this class during the year, the study's participants were 27 third and fourth graders who remained in the class for most of the year. The elementary school drew its students from the surrounding neighborhood, a community largely comprised of African American families; most of the children in this classroom were, likewise, black youngsters. The children in the classroom represented a wide range of academic abilities, and none of the children received any special instruction in reading or writing beyond what was provided by the regular classroom teacher.

Several children were selected from among the members of the classroom for case-study analysis. These children were neither the highest nor the lowest achieving students in the classroom. Based on conversations with the teacher and on our examination of the reading-response journals and writing folders of each child in the classroom during the first two months of the study, we determined that the children selected for case study did not engage in significantly more or less reading or writing than most other children in the classroom. Additionally, they were chosen for case-study analysis because their work reflected the range of reading and writing done by the entire group of children in the classroom. To insure the validity of our initial choices, we compared the literacy practices of the case-study children with all other children in the class throughout the study.

Vicki, the classroom teacher, was a woman in her late forties. Although not an African American, she had lived in the city where the school was located for much of her life, and she had taught in the city for approximately twenty-five years. Throughout those years, Vicki devoted a considerable amount of her time and energy to trying to improve the community in which she and her students lived and attended school. For example, she often provided children with rides to and from school; she took them to cultural and recreational events; she developed personal relationships with some of the children's parents; and she became involved with interest groups and activities in the local community.

Our interest in Vicki's classroom began in the year prior to this investigation. She was a student in a graduate seminar on literacy instruction taught by the first author. After several course-related conversations, Vicki invited the first author and another student in the seminar (Daniel Madigan) to visit her classroom and talk about a possible collaborative

research project. These visits eventually led to several research projects, including the one reported in this article.

Classroom Context and Literacy Activities

The curriculum in this elementary school was organized according to separate academic blocks (i.e., children in the upper elementary grades did not participate in self-contained classrooms). Within this arrangement, Vicki met with this class of children each day for approximately 2.5 hours of language arts instruction. They received additional instruction in math, history, science, art, and physical education with other teachers in separate classrooms. In developing an academic and personally meaningful curriculum in her classroom, Vicki sought to validate children's personal interests and experiences while also following school district policies for addressing basic skills and improving students' standardized reading and writing scores. During two days each week, Vicki instructed students in basic skills and strategies, using a Houghton Mifflin basal series. These lessons focused on instruction in vocabulary, comprehension, spelling, grammar and usage, and word analysis.

Although Vicki designed instruction to develop children's basic literacy skills and to prepare them for state-mandated criterion referenced tests, she also wanted students to explore the possible uses of literacy for understanding their own lives and the world in which they lived. To this end, Vicki devoted approximately three days of each week to open-ended reading and writing activities designed to foster these affective uses of literacy. Additionally, Vicki believed that the use of open-ended activities would improve what she perceived to be a general lack of motivation toward reading and writing on the part of many students in this school. Her goal was to develop students who would become fluent readers and competent writers of extended discourse. Aware of the complexities and demands of teaching literacy in an urban area replete with problems, she wanted to create an environment and a set of activities that would address children's life situations while scaffolding their literacy development.

Because the development of these activities was new terrain for Vicki, she invited several researchers (including the authors) to work with her in developing and implementing some of these activities. Although she made use of suggestions that these researchers offered, Vicki almost always transformed them, thus maintaining primary ownership of the language arts activities that developed.

Three key events helped to initiate the kinds of literacy practices that Vicki developed in her classroom. At the beginning of the year, she helped the children get to know one another by inviting them to tell

stories about themselves. The children were asked to arrange their desks in a circle and to share some experiences or details about themselves or their families. As this story-sharing time came to a close, Vicki reminded the children that people also use writing to tell about themselves and learn about each other.

Second, children were invited to plan and videotape a tour of the neighborhood where they lived and attended school. During the tour, children offered extensive commentary about a variety of local landmarks, and they related experiences about places that had particular meaning for them (e.g., churches, homes of relatives and friends, favorite restaurants, neighborhood stores, parks, abandoned homes, and local hang-outs). This commentary included historical information about local landmarks, as well as information about the communal significance of these sites. For example, as the children made their way through the surrounding neighborhood, many of them wanted to share their thoughts about the local park. One ten-year-old girl recalled coming to the park to play: "I come to the park sometimes, and you can go on the swings and the monkey bars, and you can stay out here a long time, and have fun." Still another child focused on the dangers of the same park: "Sometimes my momma goes to the park and we have picnics with our father and everybody in another park. And sometimes we don't go here [to this park] because my momma says it's dangerous over here at this one."

Finally, Vicki involved the children in drawing and constructing colorful "signs" or posters about the streets on which they lived. In constructing these "signs of community life," as she referred to them, children were encouraged to reflect upon those aspects of their community that they wished to celebrate as well as those they wished to change. After sharing their initial ideas, the children were asked the following question: "If we could place a sign in our neighborhood, what would it say?" Vicki then explained that the yellow-papered bulletin board in the back of the room would be like "house lights" illuminating their street signs and pictures. In a few days, these "signs of community life" were displayed across the bulletin board revealing many of the children's hopes, interests, and concerns as they pertained to their lives and their community. The following messages were representative of the children's "signs": "Please Don't Take Down The Basketball Rims," "Be Kind to One Another," "Stay in School," "Let's Clean Up Our Neighborhood," "Don't Speed Down the Streets: Watch For Children," and "Street of Peace." In subsequent days, Vicki directed the children's attention to these "signs" in an effort to encourage them to view their own writing as a vehicle for "telling someone or many people something we wanted them to know or hear."

These and other similar activities served several purposes in Vicki's classroom. First, they helped both to initiate and to sustain much of the writing the children did throughout the year. Second, they served to authenticate children's own lives and experiences as legitimate school "subjects" and as potential starting points for academic learning and moral growth. Third, they provided a strong basis for the development of community in the class. Finally, they helped to introduce children to the ways that literacy could be used for individual expression as well as for participating in their social worlds.

Throughout the remainder of the school year, the children were engaged in several different kinds of reading activities: reading and discussing stories from the classroom basal series, reading and responding to self-selected library books, and listening to and discussing stories that Vicki read aloud. To foster children's interest in reading, Vicki regularly made books available from the school library. She also asked children to brainstorm their own lists of possible topics for reading, and she purchased books on these topics to become part of her classroom library.

Children began most days by reading silently from a teacher-selected basal story or from self-selected books, and they were encouraged to "reflect upon" or "write a sentence" in their reading-response journals about events or characters in the story or book that reminded them of experiences in their lives. After reading, several children were typically invited to share entries from their reading-response journals, and the other children in the class were invited to discuss these entries in small- and whole-group meetings. In both their written responses and in class discussions, Vicki sometimes encouraged children to reflect on their feelings and reactions in response to particular texts by posing specific kinds of questions (e.g., "Reflect on what you read?" "How did the story make you feel?" "What did the story make you think?"). She also encouraged children to explore the reasons why an author might have written a particular piece (e.g., "Why do you think this author wrote her or his story?" "What did they want us to think, know, or do?").

Vicki also provided the children with many different opportunities to write about topics that they found interesting or important. At times, the children needed more specific advice regarding potential topics for writing. In these cases, Vicki assisted children in brainstorming lists of possible writing ideas. Among the topics generated by the children in one session were: "If I were mayor," "My friends," "Thanksgiving," "Things I want," "Harriet Tubman," "What I want to be when I grow up," "Being an astronaut," and "I'm going to help people." In addition, the children were often reminded to consider their own experiences and those of their friends, family, community members, and other noteworthy

events (local or national) as important props for writing projects. Finally, the children's attention was directed to the written work of other children as a source of ideas and to the topics that professional authors chose to explore in their writing.

In the context of these writing experiences, Vicki often taught mini-lessons on the writing process and specific writing skills. Such instruction was further enhanced through a variety of collaborative writing activities such as peer response, revision, and editing. One part of the classroom was designated as a "sharing corner," a place for reading and discussing books and one another's written work. Children were also involved in publishing a bi-monthly, in-class "magazine" that was displayed in a specially designed corner of the room for all members of the class to read. As part of the publishing process, and on a rotating basis, all children worked as editors for this "magazine." For most of these activities, Vicki provided children with instruction pertaining to specific aspects of their writing in dyadic, small group, or whole class conferences.

Data and Data Collection

Data for this study were collected during classroom visits made once a week from November to May (both to observe and to participate in children's shared reading activities, individual and collaborative writing sessions, and peer editing sessions). During these visits, we engaged in several modes of data collection, including interviewing all the children about their reading and writing, interviewing the teacher about the ongoing development of classroom work, collecting copies of children's written texts and children's reading-response journals, tape-recording collaborative writing activities and peer editing sessions, and composing field notes of many classroom activities. All of these data constituted the interpretive context for understanding the children's engagement in reading and writing.

Although we interacted with all of the children in the classroom on a regular basis, we also focused more systematically on the literate activities of several case-study children. In-depth interviews were conducted with these children on a monthly basis, beginning on the fifth week of the study and continuing through the remainder of the school year. A total of at least 5 interviews were conducted with each child. Interviews varied in length from approximately 30 to 60 minutes. Importantly, interviews took the form of "conversations" and were designed to engage children in talking about their reasons for reading or writing particular texts. In developing and conducting the interviews, we were informed by Mishler's (1986) work which defines the distinct qualities and strengths of dialogic interviewing as a method of inquiry in the human sciences.¹

During each interview, children were asked to review the reading and writing they had done since the previous interview and to identify those written texts they wished to talk about. Children's reading-response journals and their writing folders served as reminders of past work. Once children had identified some texts of interest, they often took control of the interviews with the interviewers asking questions designed to help children elaborate on their comments. Interview questions were modeled after the kinds of questions the teacher asked on a regular basis during classroom literacy activities. They were invited to discuss their reasons for choosing to read or write particular texts (e.g., "I'm wondering what made you want to read or write this text?" "I'm interested in why you like to write about black heroes?" "I'm curious about why that character reminds you of your sister?"). Children were also asked questions about what they were thinking or feeling while reading or writing and why (e.g., "Could you tell me what you were thinking about or feeling while you were reading or writing?" "As you read this, did you ever think about yourself or other people you know?" "Can you remember why you felt happy when you read or wrote that part?"). Each interview was concluded when students seemed to have little more to say about the texts being discussed.

Data Coding and Analyses

We conducted a descriptive analysis of the books that these children read and the texts that they wrote, as well as the general topics embodied in these books and compositions (i.e., recreational interests, self and personal issues, social relationships, social issues). We also analyzed our data interpretively for the functions that seemed to underlie children's reading and writing practices. We use the term *function* here to refer to the intellectual, social, and emotional uses for specific reading and writing practices. We distinguish functions from topics, where topics are defined as what children read or wrote about, whereas functions are defined as what children "did with words" or what doing things with words did to them as they read and wrote about particular topics (Austin, 1962). Functions, therefore, can never be "read off" the content of texts. Rather, they must be constructed through various recontextualization processes (e.g., talking with children about what they read or write; examining the ways that children seem to be affected by or affect others through these reading and writing practices; mapping the distribution and reception patterns of books children read, texts they write, and talk they engage in).

We also distinguish functions from specific purposes. Specific purposes always imply intention. Functions, although they may be intended,

have more to do with the effects of using language or literacy in particular ways. Language and literacy may function for children in ways that they did not necessarily intend, a point made amply clear, for example, in the work of Vygotsky (1978).

We used the constant comparative method of data analysis (Strauss, 1987) to develop an analytical framework for this study. To enhance the trustworthiness of this framework, we engaged in a process of triangulation that involved discussing our data and analyses with other researchers, the children, some of their parents, and the classroom teacher. This process continued far beyond our exit from the field until we were satisfied that we had generated a set of functions that were both grounded in the data and adequate to the task of analyzing the data. The framework that we finally settled on appears as the Appendix. Using this framework, we analyzed children's reading-response journals and interview transcripts searching for patterns and generating descriptions and explanations that would allow us to construct accounts of how reading and writing functioned for the children in the classroom.

It is important to note here that neither the main divisions nor the individual functions of our analytical framework are defined by mutually exclusive and exhaustive sets of properties. Rather, they are more like prototypes, with each type blending into other types that bear some similarity to them. Because the framework is constituted in this way, we used it more as an interpretive guide in our analyses rather than as a coding scheme per se. Also important to note is the fact that particular functions of reading and writing were not usually enacted singularly by children. It was more common for children to enact multiple related functions at the same time.

Results

In the following sections, we present findings from this study. First, we provide results from quantitative analyses of topics embodied in the books that children read and the texts that they wrote during the year. Next, we present interpretative analyses of the ways that children used reading and writing to enhance their understandings of themselves and their social worlds. Finally, we present profiles of the reading and writing practices of two children selected for case study, highlighting the unique ways that these children sought to interpret various personal and social dimensions of their lives.

Reading and Writing in the Classroom

As a first step in understanding children's reading and writing practices, we counted the numbers of books that they read and the texts they wrote

during the school year. Collectively, the children read approximately 700 books representing roughly 300 different titles over the course of the year. These books included a combination of story books, chapter books, and information books written for children. The fewest number of books read by any given child was 15 and the largest number was 41. Children also composed many of their own texts. In all, we collected 278 original compositions, many of which had been revised several times. Because we were in the classroom infrequently, we never managed to collect many of the texts that children wrote. Not surprisingly, some children composed more than others. The fewest number of compositions that we collected from a given child was 3 and the largest number was 16.

To get a sense of children's reading and writing practices in the classroom as a whole, we coded and analyzed the distribution of the primary topics (i.e., recreational interests, self and personal issues, social relationships, social issues) embodied in the books that they read and the texts that they wrote. The results of these analyses appear in Table 1.

As indicated in the table, compared with any other single topic, children's reading most often focused on recreational interests. However, children also read quite a few books about personal issues, social relationships, and social problems. Some of these problems were ones common to life in their community; others were problems known to children primarily through regional, national, and international media representation. In partial contrast to this distribution, children's writing focused on personal issues more often than on any other single topic. However, children also wrote some texts about recreational interests, social relationships, and social problems.

Table 1

Distribution of General Topics about Which Children Read and Wrote

	Recreational Interests	Self and Personal Issues	Social Relationships	Social Issues
N of Books Read Containing these Topics				
Mean	14.4	8.0	7.4	4.9
S.D.	4.1	2.6	1.9	1.7
N of Written Texts Containing these Topics				
Mean	2.7	5.0	3.7	2.7
S.D.	1.1	1.8	1.7	1.5

Although children's individual reading interests varied, many of the most popular books embodied the following more specific themes: friends and friendships, families and family relationships, sports and sports heroes, heroic experiences of child or adolescent characters, animal stories, the lives of important African Americans, and social and cultural histories. Some of the texts that were read by many or most children included: *Harriet Tubman: The Road to Freedom* (Bains, 1982), *I Have a Dream: The Story of Martin* (Davidson, 1991), *Honey I Love and Other Tales* (Greenfield, 1978), *Diana Ross: Star Supreme* (Haskins, 1986), *Here Comes The Strikeout* (Kessler, 1965), *The Chalk Doll* (Pomerantz, 1989), *Ragtime Tumpie* (Schroeder, 1989), *Encyclopedia Brown Gets His Man* (Sobol, 1982), *Maniac Magee* (Spinelli, 1990), *To Hell With Dying* (Walker, 1988), and *Commander Toad in Space* (Yolen, 1980).

Although individual children varied with respect to the specific topics, issues, or experiences they chose to write about, their writing covered a relatively wide range of topics: relationships with teachers, family members, and peers; social problems in the immediate community and the world (e.g., drug abuse, violence, poverty, homelessness, the Gulf War); African American role models; memorable events or experiences in their lives (e.g., birthdays, vacations, special occasions, humorous experiences); their lives in school (e.g., favorite teachers and subjects); hobbies and interests (e.g., sports, knights and dragons, space travel, endangered animals, pets, rocks and minerals), and their aspirations for themselves and their community. The following titles of compositions indicate the range of topics about which they wrote: "The Things I Wish For," "Putting On The Wrong Dress," "Drugs Are No Good," "Summer With My 'Homies'," "When I Grow Up," "Harriet Tubman," "Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Still Lives," "Triplet Life," "We're Having War," "Non Violence," "Fathers," "I Want a Puppy," and "Why My Mom Is So Thoroughly Happy."

To gain a sense of the specific ways that reading and writing may have enhanced children's understanding of themselves and their social worlds, we conducted interpretive analyses of the personal and social functions that they enacted through their literacy practices.

Personal Functions. The most common uses of reading and writing reported by children were personal in nature. Among the many personal functions that children mentioned, several key functions emerged as the most salient. First, reading and writing often functioned as a means to envision and explore possible selves. In addition, they functioned to describe or remember personal experiences or interests in their lives. Third, they served to objectify and reflect upon certain problematic emotions and circumstances related to important moral and ethical dilemmas in

their lives. Finally, children engaged in reading and writing to "experience" or participate in the storied lives and worlds of imaginary characters.

Reading (and to a lesser extent writing) provided children with opportunities to adopt and imaginatively explore a variety of new roles, responsibilities, and identities derived from both real and fictional story characters. For example, after reading several books about well-known African American women, Mary wrote the following in her reading-response journal, indexing how the experiences of these women enabled her to reflect upon possible selves and possible roles for herself:

Leontyne Price is a famous young lady. I read about her and sometimes I think I want to be like her. I read about lots of Black Americans like Duke Ellington, Barbara Jordon, and I forgot Phillis Wheatly. Some of these Blacks are dead already and I wish people would be alive. . . . Harriet Tubman Helped every one when it was slave wartime. I feel like I help people when I think about her.

Edward also provided insight into how writing functioned in this way. In a story he wrote entitled "Basketball," Edward reconstructed the events of a basketball game at school in which he had played. In this reconstruction, he highlighted how he had stolen the ball from a friend on the other team and almost scored a basket. "Stealing the ball from a friend" was an event hardly ever experienced by Edward, and "almost scoring a basket" bordered on hyperbole as well. Yet, when we invited Edward to tell us what he was thinking about when he wrote this piece, he was quite specific about the possible self that he envisioned. It was a self in which average or below average performances would be transformed into exceptional ones:

[When I wrote this] I was thinking I could play good like one of them players, like John Salley. . . . It made me feel like I picture where they're playing, and when I grow up I'm gonna play college basketball all the way to the NBA.

Children's reading and writing also functioned as vehicles through which to remember, savor, and reflect upon personal experiences (e.g., birthdays, holidays, vacations) or important people in their lives (e.g., grandparents, public figures, sports heroes). For example, Ricardo wrote a personal narrative entitled "My Life" that described his success in school, the loneliness associated with being an only child, and his feelings about his grandfather's death. In one of our interviews with Ricardo, we invited him to discuss his reasons for writing his story and any thoughts it brought to mind. As he spoke, Ricardo focused almost exclusively on the memory of his grandfather:

'Cause um, I was just sittin' there thinkin' about what I was going to write and it came to me. I was thinking about my life and stuff. . . . And I think about how my grandfather did stuff with me. I wanted to tell about how he did things with me. . . . *My grandfather sometimes he came and picked me up from school when I was little. [When I write] it makes me think about him.*

The ways in which reading and writing functioned to help children remember or savor personal experiences was also illustrated nicely by Tasha. In an excerpt from her response journal about *Spirit Child: A Story of the Nativity* (Bierhorst, 1990), she wrote about memories the text brought to mind:

I like this book because it is all about love and that reminds me of my granddady we use to have fun with each other we use to enjoy each other. This book was interetien [interesting] because they were talking all about there baby [like] what will the baby wear and they would name it little Juese [Jesus].

Children also found reading and writing to be instrumental in objectifying and reflecting upon certain problematic emotions. Interestingly, although their teacher routinely invited children to write about their lives, she also cautioned them about not revealing things that they might later regret. Thus, the candor with which children often enacted this function surprised us. In relation to this point, Jamar described to us how writing the essay "Emergency" (see Figure 1) enabled him to deal with his thoughts and feelings regarding a frightening incident of drug-related violence that he experienced in his own home:

One day I stayed home from school because I was sick. My father was taking care of me. When my twin brother Jason came home from school my older brother's friend, Roderick, wanted to see my older brother, John. My father wouldn't let Roderick come in because he knew he dealed crack and my brother, John, had gotten in trouble with him the day before.

On the day I was sick, Roderick came down to my house with his friend. This is how it happened they were pulled over by the police my big brother John was with them. The police found crack in the car so the car was confiscated so Roderick came down to my house to talk to my brother John but my father wouldn't let him he asked my father, "What's your problem?" "I don't have a problem," said my father. Roderick and his friend backed away from the house. Roderick started to shoot and hit the window and hit the stereo. He shot the kitchen and hit the cupboard. Jason and I got down on the floor.

My mother came home from work, she is a teacher. My father told her what happened and they called the police they came right over. The second time they shot they hit the door my mother called the police at 9:30 p.m. but they didn't get there until 10:00 p.m. We stayed with my grandfather until Friday. When I came home I was sick my father got protection nothing has happened so far. I think of this scary memory all the time it is really scary to me.

Figure 1: "Emergency" by Jamar

When I wrote it down, I felt better because I was always, before I wrote it down I was always scared. . . . I was still scared just a couple of weeks after it happened. . . . 'Cause I kept all this fear inside me, but when I wrote it down I just let it out. . . . I felt better about writing it than keeping it a secret 'cause I wasn't scared anymore.

Similarly, Shanice described how reading the book *To Hell with Dying* (Walker, 1988) helped her to deal with the problematic emotions she experienced in relation to the recent alcohol-related death of her uncle. In her reading-response journal, Shanice drew a connection between her own experience and the experience of the author, Alice Walker:

I like this book Because It tells you more what will happen to you if you do those kinds of things. When my uncle died from drinking. I was hurt and I felt the same way as Alice Walker did. But when I went to the funeral I got Back home and I sat in my room and thought about it. then I learned how to deal with it.

Especially through reading, children also sought to share in the exploits and experiences of the characters about whom they read. For example, in an excerpt from his reading-response journal, André described how the story *Commander Toad in Space* (Yolen, 1980) enabled him to vicariously experience the "lived worlds" of characters from a time and place quite removed from his own:

this story is a mitery [mystery] and funny I like misterys. misterys are great to me and they fun to me and their great to read and I felt lik I was in a spaise ship and I went to explore new glaxies and plantes. I felt worried [because] I had to find a guy named Tip Top the master of disguise. and I had to find him. he had broke out of jail in 1983 and took a police space ship into a plante called mars. it was a hot plante and I sharde [searched] and sharde. and after three days I found a dinemind [diamond] and it was glowing and it had a finger [figure] on it and it lead me to a cave that the Tip Top was in.

Social Functions. Children also used reading and writing to understand, affirm, and negotiate social relationships and to develop their awareness of significant social problems. Negotiating social relationships was one of the most common of these social functions. Billy was one child who often used writing to construct relationships with family members who read and responded to his writing. Similar to other children in the class, Billy's interests in the lives of important African Americans was cultivated by the celebration of Black History Month in his classroom. However, Billy continued to read and write about his "favorite" African Americans long after other members of his class moved on to other topics. Among the many texts he composed for himself and for his peers to read, several included biographical sketches of famous African

Americans such as Rosa Parks, Frederick Douglass, Harriett Tubman, Martin Luther King Jr., and Malcolm X. When we asked him to reflect upon his reasons for writing these texts, he often mentioned experiences that different members of his family had with famous African Americans and their role in the struggle for social equality. Through his writing he seemed to deepen his affiliations with family members who, like him, valued the lives and accomplishments of important African American leaders:

[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 after he was marching with Dr. Martin Luther King they wetted his shirt up. They wetted my granddaddy's shirt up when the firemen came. . . . And then, when my grandfather, he travels a lot, he went to Atlanta, Georgia, and then he put some sunflowers on his grave.

Children also used reading and writing in negotiating peer relationships. For example, in an interview Edward told us about how he made public his feelings about his friend, Jamar, by writing an essay about him:

[I wrote it] because Jamar is my best friend, and he always help me with stuff that I need help on. . . . I want to get this in the [classroom] magazine. And then everybody in the classroom can go up there and look at the board. . . . Um, they'll learn who's my best friend, and now they know that's my best friend. And they know my name and if I'm in trouble, some, and, like all the kids in my classroom, like if my cousin came up to school and knew I was in trouble, and he couldn't do nothin', he can go get Jamar, and maybe Jamar can do something about it.

Reading and writing also became vehicles through which children could develop their awareness of important social problems. Among the serious problems that children read about, discussed with their teacher, and wrote about were racism, social inequality, poverty, and violence. For example, after reading the biography, *Jackie Robinson and the Story of All Black Baseball* (O'Connor, 1989), Donald wrote in his reading-response journal about how the book had raised his awareness of racial conflict, as well as his understanding of the indignities suffered by African Americans in this country:

I think blacks were treated badly in the 1940's in major league baseball because when Jackie hit the ball solid, whites called him nigger and told him to work on a cotton field picking cotton. White and black had different rest rooms and white could go into blacks rest rooms. I think blacks should have did more things to them [stood up to whites] when they were very mean to blacks. I am glad I wasn't living back then because I would be dead today.

Some children also went beyond increasing their own awareness of social problems to imagine how reading and writing might be used to solve them. Foregrounding the potential of written language as social action, Tanya described how she hoped that her essay, "Non-Violence" (see Figure 2), might change people's values or beliefs about significant social problems and perhaps even mobilize them to change their attitudes and behaviors:

I asked my mother what is violence and she said 'something I never want to do'. . . . But sometimes I walk, or sometimes when I go to school I see people real close to each other and I just get scared, and I walk faster, and sometimes I get scared and I'll think people shouldn't be scared to walk up and down the street, like in their neighborhoods. They should feel safe. . . . [When I wrote this] it made me feel like to just go and tell people or ask people, 'please don't do violence anymore,' or something like that. I was asking them.

I think there shouldn't be violence over dumb things because people are dying for nothing. I don't think violence is good because sometimes when kids walk up and down the street and see people killing each other and they learn how to kill. I don't think people or kids should be scared to walk down the street.

The reason I wrote this story is because I wanted people to know my feelings about violence and that feeling is I don't think there should be violence because sometimes when someone dies the President doesn't do anything about it and I don't think it is fair. I think the Mayor is the only one person in charge doing something to help stop crime and help people when they are in trouble. So please help stop crime because I know I am.

Figure 2: "Non-Violence" by Tanya

All of these examples serve to illustrate some of the ways that children used reading and writing to explore new roles and social identities, to understand and negotiate human experiences, to wrestle with vexing social problems, and to imagine how literacy might function in addressing these problems. Additionally, they provide some insights into how reading or writing seemed more or less useful in relation to different personal and social functions.

Jamar and Tanya: Tales of Two Readers and Writers

Although the foregoing overview allowed us to identify some of the salient ways that reading and writing functioned for children, it could not articulate the unique ways that individual children used acts of reading and writing to understand the interests, needs, and issues most central to their individual experiences. Nor could such an overview

demonstrate how particular children orchestrated various functions in synergetic ways. In this section, we attempt to address these lacunae.

Jamar and Tanya were the two children chosen for case-study analysis because we wanted to include both a boy and a girl, and because based on an examination of their reading and writing and our interactions with them, their work seemed to be representative of many of the children in the class, particularly with respect to the range of topics about which children read and wrote. This congruence is apparent from a comparison of Table 1 above and Table 2 below.

Jamar

Jamar was a sensitive and soft-spoken third-grade boy. Soon after we met him, he informed us that his mother thought he was "a very creative person," because he could always "make up a story" while he played with his toy "super heroes" at home. In school, Jamar often used literacy as a vehicle for participating in the imaginary lives and worlds of fictional story characters. One of the first books he chose to read during the year was *St. George and the Dragon*, a storybook written by Margaret Hodges (1984) about a "brave and noble knight" who saves a kingdom of people from a "grim and terrible dragon" who was laying waste to their land. In our conversations about the book, Jamar indicated that the story enabled him to vicariously experience the lives of characters from a time and place quite removed from his own:

The story made me feel that I'd like to be both characters in the story. I would like to beat the dragon, and I would like to be the dragon. I'd like

Table 2

Distribution of General Topics about Which Jamar and Tanya Read and Wrote

	Recreational Interests	Self and Personal Issues	Social Relationships	Social Issues
N of Books Read Containing these Topics				
Jamar	11	7	5	4
Tanya	18	10	11	4
N of Written Texts Containing these Topics				
Jamar	7	5	4	7
Tanya	3	6	6	3

to know how it feels to be something, a giant animal, but then you're defeated by a little person. I'd like to know how it feels to be like, crush cities and stuff, but not hurt people.

Although Jamar disclosed his desire to "crush cities and stuff," he was careful to add that he would "not hurt people." In this early conversation about his reading and writing, Jamar foreshadowed what later emerged as an abiding concern for both the individual and collective well-being of his family, his peers, and the members of the community in which he lived.

As a nine-year-old child living amidst a variety of significant social problems common to many urban areas, some of which had directly affected him and the members of his family, reading and writing often functioned to help him understand and reconcile the problematic emotions he experienced in relation to various social issues. We noted earlier that Jamar's essay, "Emergency," functioned as a vehicle through which he could objectify problematic emotions related to his experiences with neighborhood violence. In similar fashion, he found the story *Maniac Magee* (Spinelli, 1990) useful in working through his feelings about racism. *Maniac Magee* is a story about the experiences of a young orphan boy struggling to understand the problems that divided black and white residents of the small town in which he lived. Vicki had read this book aloud to the class because she thought it would provide children with occasions to discuss key issues related to their everyday lives (e.g., intergroup conflict and communication). Like many other children, Jamar had resonated strongly with *Maniac Magee*. He told us in an interview how reading the book had put him in touch with his own feelings of confusion about being part of an African American family and also having a white grandmother:

When we read *Maniac Magee* I think about how it would be if I had some, a white sister, and I was black, and people didn't understand why I had a white family, white people in my family. And I did have a white person in my family. See my grandmother, I used to have two grandmas and one of 'em died. I mean I used to have three grandmas, and one of 'em died, so I have two grandmas now. And um, I had a white grandma, that was my mother's, that was my mother's mother, but she died. And then I think about it. My mother tells me stories about her and her [white] mother, my grandma, and it makes me feel good. I feel better, because my mother, I read books about seragated [segregated] times, and then, then I have a white person in my family, so then the white person dies. And it makes me feel better, and I understand seragated [segregated] times because I had a white person in my family.

Although the connections that Jamar made between his own life and the life of *Maniac Magee* were only partially explicit, they indexed his

abiding concern with understanding inter-racial conflict. Indeed, he revisited this topic in much of his reading and writing, in conversations with many of his age-mates, and in his contributions to class discussions. This was a topic that was commonly revisited by Vicki throughout the year and one that the other children also addressed fairly often in their reading and writing.

In December, many classroom activities revolved around the African American celebration of Kwanzaa. Within these activities, many famous African American leaders were discussed. Additionally, Jamar had just read a biography of Martin Luther King, Jr., *I Have a Dream: The Story of Martin* (Davidson, 1991), which had been recommended to him by Deana, a white classmate with whom he had recently formed a friendship. In discussing his thoughts and feelings about this book, Jamar noted how it had raised his awareness of some of the specific indignities to which southern Blacks were subjected:

Deana 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 Luther King Jr.] 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. . . . When I grow up and have, am a grandfather I can tell my children about Dr. Martin Luther King.

After several in-class conversations with Deana about the book and their friendship, Jamar wrote an essay entitled "What I Think of Martin Luther King" in which he continued to explore some of the complex issues surrounding inter-racial relationships. The following excerpt from Jamar's essay illustrates this point:

Martin Luther King Jr., is the person who saved blacks from the bad hands of the whites but not all whites are bad because I have white friends and some of those white friends are Deana and Mark. It's not the color of your skin that matters but what you think and feel for others.

Jamar's essay was read by several children in the classroom including Deana who responded, "Yeah, Jamar, hate can't fight hate." Interestingly, this is a phrase taken verbatim from *I Have a Dream: The Story of Martin*. A few days later, another child echoed this sentiment when he explained,

"I have a friend, Deana, she is white. So what. We cooperate and play, and if I need a pencil she give it to me. . . . I never knew about hate can't fight hate. So, I know about that more and 'free at last.'"

Jamar also used writing as a means to objectify emotions in relation to social problems that affected him only indirectly. One text that was especially significant was his essay, "Poor People," which appears in Figure 3. This essay was written in response to a classroom writing activity that asked children to recall and write about something that they noticed or observed on the way to or from school. Children were told that they could write about something ordinary or something unusual or different. The children in the class noticed and wrote about many different topics. Jamar chose to write about the homeless people that he frequently saw on the street.

In discussing this essay, Jamar focused on his emotional response to the many encounters he had with homeless people in his neighborhood, as well as how he used writing to deal with these emotions:

I see a lot of poor people when I walk down the street. Sometimes I be seeing them when I walk to school or I'm going to my friend's house, I see a poor person. . . . I feel sorry for a poor person 'cause they don't have nothing to eat or nothing. . . . 'Cause, when a poor person comes asking for money, like when I was with my grandma once, and she was getting gas, this poor person came up to the car and asked, could he pump the gas for her? 'Cause he didn't have no money, he wanted to, he wanted a couple of dollars. . . . I feel sorry for a poor person and it helps me to feel better if I write about it.

Jamar also described how he thought the essay might transform the values and attitudes of other people with regard to homelessness:

I would like other people to think about, I would like them to like it. And I wish that it ["Poor People"] would change 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.

I'm going to help people when I grow up and even when I'm a child I'm going to help poor people. I'm going to run a homeless center for all I would give them clothes. I would feel very good and I know some people would help to. Thats what I'm going to do. I would like to give them a house to. I will help in many different ways. All I want to do is help people who don't have the money. It will be the best. Let's help it's the right thing to do. Sometimes I walk or ride past a poor person one time I was at the market with my mother and brother Jason and I saw a poor person. I ask my mother to give them a dollar but when my mother came out of the car he was gone. I was sad. I had wished that I could have the money when I see another poor person I am going to help him and I will do it.

Figure 3: "Poor People" by Jamar

Jamar's belief in the constructive potential of his own writing was not unlike the perspective that he and his classmates were often encouraged to assume in both teacher- and student-led discussions of classroom books. Many of these discussions placed special importance and value on exploring the "reasons why" an author may have written a particular text. Not surprisingly, Jamar appropriated much of the power that he saw attributed to the work of professional authors to the particular texts that he, himself, had written. Additionally, he and the other children in the class experienced how "published" works became topics of informal conversations and lively debates among peers. One of the texts that the children in the class were encouraged to discuss during the year was a classroom anthology comprised of student writing from the previous year. On several occasions, Jamar's teacher selected particular works from this anthology to explore the question of "Why do writers write?" Jamar took a special interest in a student essay on handgun violence and handgun control published in the anthology. After a class discussion of this essay, Jamar composed the following entry in his reading-response journal:

This book has meaning asphaly (especially) the person who wrote the story, "Guns." He or she was right guns do kill people. And we have guns I think people should lock them up. And I think the whole world should read this book. This book [essay] is very good example to what happens in this world today it is scary.

Through re-enunciating the message of "Guns," Jamar seemed to strengthen his own convictions about the problem of handgun violence in his community and in the wider society. In declaring that "the whole world should read this book," Jamar seemed to underscore his belief in the transformative potential of writing. This power, here experienced through reading "Guns," soon exerted an intertextual influence on Jamar's own writing. For example, after writing his reaction to "Guns," Jamar wrote an essay entitled "Dwain" (see Figure 4), a student with whom Jamar had recently become a writing partner. In this essay, he simultaneously affirmed his relationship with Dwain while also celebrating his developing identity as a writer and their joint power as writers to combat social ills.

Dwain and I are good friends. We both like to write. Maybe one day we will both be writers and write books about drugs that they are bad. That they do kill. That they are not your friend but they enemy. And we will save lives and the world because we care.

Figure 4: "Dwain" by Jamar

"Dwain," and other essays and stories that Jamar wrote, were emblematic of the transformative potential that he associated with writing, as well as his ambitions for proactive involvement in a world that he found problematic. This was an orientation that his teacher also shared and made known in classroom conversations and discussions. For Jamar, this ambition took many forms that ranged from more serious to more playful, and he often combined these two modes of engagement within individual texts. For example, one of the "possible selves" that Jamar imagined for himself was to be an astronaut. As he explained in an interview we conducted with him about his interest in space, he wanted to be "like Neil Armstrong or discover something that can, is very, very small but by itself can power a jet so we won't have to pollute the air any more." In a story that he wrote called "I Want to Visit Space" (see Figure 5), Jamar demonstrated that his investment in being an astronaut was quite complex, involving both the possibility of "Top Gun" glory originally foreshadowed in *St. George and The Dragon*, and the more serious-minded possibility of discovering solutions to real-world problems through the conduct of extraterrestrial research. As was the case with much of Jamar's writing, "I Want to Visit Space" became an arena in which the complexity of possible roles, possible worlds, and the relations among them could be imagined and rehearsed.

I want to visit space when I grow up. I've always wanted to see space but I get scrd (scared) sometimes becausase my brain starts to go crazy. So I don't think about that any more. my mother is cooking dinner. After i eat i think about space more. And I think about myself as a important person. Like Niel Arms-trong. I would descover something That was so small but so powerful by itself could power a plane. Or even a jet. but maybe I won't be a space exploerer. Maybe I will be a actor. I want to do a lot of things. I watch a lot of space programs sometimes I wounder what would happen if an animal was sent to space. Space has always ben mesery [mystery] to me what would happen to us without space sometimes. Sometimes I go to sleep thinking of space. I fall into a deep sleep. I dream that I am a important person. That I discovered something that could stop polshin [pollution]. Polshin is a very big problem. In the future I hope that this problem will be solved. I hope the future is as clean as [I] think it will be. If siniect [scientists] decide to send garbage into space maybe space would do something to the garbage. And recycle it that would solve our garbage problem. Or send a rocket to the sun. Sinicest already thought about it but they did not do it they thought it might do something to the sun. And cause problems for the city.

If they took a chance who knows what could of happened. Sometimes if you take a chance with Mother nature you end up wrong. most people do that but [that] makes another problem.

Figure 5: "I Want to Visit Space" by Jamar

To summarize, reading and writing functioned for Jamar in ways that allowed him to address a host of complex personal and social issues. He engaged in both reading and writing to work out problematic emotions related to certain social problems. His teacher provided him and his peers with relevant books on the recent history and the origins of these problems. And he engaged in acts of writing as vehicles for envisioning solutions to prevailing social conditions and as a catalyst for changing them. As Jamar enacted these functions through reading and writing, he also celebrated his own identity as a literate person.

Tanya

Tanya, a fourth-grade girl, enjoyed telling stories about her life at home, her family and friends, her hopes for her future, and about the everyday joys and problems of a young girl growing up in a large urban area. In class, Tanya frequently shared family stories and reactions to various books she had read, and she readily offered her opinions in response to the writing of her peers. Over time, Tanya fashioned herself as an important member of the developing classroom community. She was outspoken on matters involving changes in the classroom, and she emerged as a voice of reason and influence among her peers—often modeling the ways of reading, writing, and talking about texts that were valued in the classroom.

Tanya read several books during the school year that simultaneously enabled her to remember or reconstruct important personal experiences in her life, as well as to understand social relationships with other children in her class. *Lulu Goes to Witch School* (O'Connor, 1987) was one of these books. This story is about a young girl named Lulu and the difficulties she encountered with Sandy, another young girl, who picks on Lulu during their first days at "witch school." In talking about the book, Tanya focused on how the experiences of Lulu and Sandy related to some of her own experiences. She began by discussing what she liked most about the book and then went on to describe the effects that reading the story had on her own understanding of friendship:

Umm, it [the book] made me laugh, and it was talking about school, and how she [Lulu] was. . . . I liked how it began where she was in school 'cause it was just like me when I went to school that first day, everybody picking on me. It brought back memories, when I was little, not when I was little, back when people, when I was picking on people and people picked on me. . . . When I first read the first part of the book, it was talking about Lulu going to witch 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 [the story] kept talking about how I was when I first came to school. And then it came to the part where Mary (a new student that had just arrived in

Tanya's class) came to school, and I started, started thinking on her [Mary]. And then it went on and on, and started, then we started being friends.

Clearly, *Lulu Goes to Witch School* provided Tanya with an occasion to reflect upon the moment when she and her friend, Mary, began to develop an important friendship—one that helped both girls mitigate the uncertainty associated with their first days at a new school. What is particularly interesting about Tanya's comments is that they reveal how the fictional story that she was reading and her own personal narrative shaped one another. Reading *Lulu Goes to Witch School* became a catalyst for dramatizing, and therefore reconstructing, a key past event in Tanya's life, and for deepening her understanding of the meaning of "friendship." At the same time, reconstructing that past event functioned to scaffold Tanya's interpretation of the story. This process was indexed in Tanya's use of the word "it" to refer simultaneously (and perhaps ambiguously) to both the fictional story and her own life-history narrative. Similarly, this process was instantiated in Tanya's seamless substitution of "I" for "Lulu" and "Mary" for "Sandy."

Although Tanya probably was not always explicitly aware of forging connections between art and life, she betrayed some awareness of this process on occasion. For example, while talking about one of the mystery stories from the series, *Encyclopedia Brown*, she commented, "It seems like I'm in the story when I read it." Similarly, while discussing her experience of reading a biography of Harriet Tubman, she noted, "I felt like I was right there, when she was freeing her people, and I was one of the people that she freed, and I was thanking her so much."

Tanya's engagement in reading and writing also functioned as a vehicle for exploring possible selves, especially in relation to certain African American role models. Tanya was particularly attracted to books about the lives of African American women, and encouraged by her teacher, she read many such books during the school year. Among the most memorable for Tanya were biographies of Josephine Baker, Leontyne Price, Diana Ross, Sojourner Truth, and Harriet Tubman. In discussing her feelings about the book, *Diana Ross: Star Supreme* (Haskins, 1986), Tanya emphasized how the story had prompted her to reflect on her own life and to imagine possibilities for her future:

This book 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. . . . I like black singers or famous people because some blacks are, maybe I could understand blacks more than whites. Or different kinds of, um, different kinds of people. I think they [Diana Ross and Martin Luther King, Jr.] were good people when they, like Dr. Martin Luther King, I think he was a good man. Or a good person when he was living. . . . Like when I grow up, I'll

probably be a singer or a preacher or somebody like Dr. Martin Luther King or Diana Ross. . . . I think it will be like something special in my life.

Tanya also celebrated the independence and self-respect of African American women through her reading of the book *Ragtime Tumpie*, (Schroeder, 1989), a story about the life of the enormously successful jazz dancer, Josephine Baker. In the following excerpt from her response journal, Tanya focused on Josephine Baker's resolve to become a professional dancer in spite of challenges from others who believed she was not capable of accomplishing such a goal:

This book is about a girl who wanted to be a female dancer but a man said she couldn't because she was to little. But she kept saying she wasn't to little to dance until he let her dance on stage. . . . I think Josephine Baker was a great dancer in her days. This book gets you to dance because of famous legends. Two thumbs up for Josephine.

Through her reading and writing about the lives of notable African Americans—especially African American women—Tanya was able to articulate some of her own life experiences and social codes. In this process, she seemed to deepen her understanding of certain life situations (e.g., poverty and ridicule) and certain human compartments (e.g., self-respect and resoluteness). Reciprocally, Tanya's richer and more complex understanding of certain dimensions of her own life allowed her to understand the life stories of Diana Ross and Josephine Baker more fully.

Tanya also explored possible selves, celebrated particular role models, and constructed her own literate values, moral codes, and everyday practices through the stories, essays, and poems that she wrote. As she did through acts of reading, Tanya used writing to reciprocally articulate certain dimensions of her own life with her understanding of the lives and issues of people about which she wrote. This process was made transparent to us when Tanya discussed her poem, "Harriet Tubman," which appears in Figure 6.

Brave was her name.
A slave and also a slave hero.
She took her people to
Canada to let them be free
and have freedom. Girl didn't
come in this world to be
no slave. She freed more
then a hundred people.
Grandma Moses they called
her, but she still did not
come in this world to be
no slave.

Figure 6: "Harriet Tubman" by Tanya

First, in response to our questions about how she came to write the piece, she described the context in which the poem was developed and her reasons for choosing to focus on Harriet Tubman:

Um, it was, since it was Black History Month, I thought I would write something about Black History Month, and then my teacher said, "you could write a story or a poem." So I thought about writing a Black history story. I wrote about other, um, Black history people like let's say Dr. Martin Luther King, and I wrote about Leontyne Price and different people like that, and then Harriet Tubman just popped into my mind 'cause she was the first lady I wanted to write about 'cause I didn't want to write about no Black history man. My first one was a man, that was Dr. Martin Luther King. . . . Then I wanted to write about Harriet Tubman 'cause she's a woman, or a lady, and I think it's good.

In subsequent comments, Tanya revealed how writing the poem about Harriet Tubman had provided her with a way to affirm her own developing identity as a writer, as well as a way to celebrate the life of an African American woman whose courage and kindness she greatly admired and sought to emulate:

When I grow up, I tell my teacher and my mother and my father that when I grow up I want to be a Black poetess or a story writer or a writer to write about Black history people from the past. . . . Harriet Tubman was one of the people who lived long ago, not long ago, but kind of long, far ago. Um, I think she was a nice person 'cause she helped a lot of people, and she just didn't go on and find the way to be free by herself and stay in Canada just to free herself. She freed a lot of people. I think she was a nice person. . . . When I wrote it I felt like I was right there, when she was freeing her people, and I was one of the people that she freed, and I was thanking her so much.

Imagining herself as a celebrated writer was also a common theme within many of Tanya's entries in her reading-response journal. In particular, she continually reiterated her desire to one day write a book of poetry. For example, in response to a book of poems by African American authors entitled *Honey, I Love and Other Tales* (Greenfield, 1978), Tanya wrote in her reading-response journal, "I think this is a good book because their telling me about black poetry that I never heard before. I think one day I'll write a book like this one or something like it."

Implicit in Tanya's desire to become a "preacher" or a "Black poetess" was an abiding concern with developing ethical postures in and through her reading and writing. Especially interesting in this regard was her sense of the power of both speech and writing to affirm her own developing moral sensibilities. Also evident were the possibilities for social reform that she connected with becoming a professional author, the result of having experienced the power of writing to command the atten-

tion and respect of peers within her own classroom. This sense of power became manifest in children's responses to her essay, "Non-Violence" (Figure 2), an essay that stimulated much discussion in the classroom and was published in the class "magazine." In describing how and why she came to write this essay, Tanya noted:

I was watching a T.V. show, no it was a movie and this lady, she writes a lot of books and she try to stop crime in her book sometimes, and I just got the idea out of it, and I thought I'll just write a story [to stop crime], and I'll probably be old enough to write a book by myself, but I thought I'd just write a story. . . . My story's about different things that should happen, that has happened in the world. . . . I like people to think, I like people to think, I like people to stop doing crimes. That's the whole reason I wrote this story, 'cause I want people to stop doing crimes. And stop killing people. . . . I wrote it for other people, so if they read it they might get something, get something out, like to stop doing violence.

To summarize, reading and writing provided Tanya with a discursive arena for exploration and growth. Her reading often served as a vehicle for reflecting upon past experiences, as well as a way to reconsider important social relationships such as peer friendships. Tanya also explored possible selves through reading and writing about the lives of particular African American leaders, especially famous African American women. In the context of re-inscribing the lives and messages of these people, Tanya continually affirmed her own developing identity as a writer. Finally, Tanya's motivation for becoming a writer was closely related to her developing ethical sensibilities.

Conclusions

This study explored the influence of a particular instructional approach and classroom community on children's literacy practices. We examined how children appropriated certain reading and writing practices made salient to them within a community where they were encouraged to read, write, and talk about themselves, their families, and their communities. Whereas past research primarily demonstrated how personal experience can function to enhance textual understanding and production, our research explored how children can use reading and writing as vehicles for personal and social exploration and growth. In this study, children used reading and writing to entertain themselves, to savor past experiences, to objectify and reconcile problematic emotions, to explore and envision possible selves, to identify with role models, and to celebrate literate values and practices. They also used reading and writing to affirm or reconstruct social relationships in their immediate worlds, to

fashion social and moral codes, and to consider possibilities for social change.

Although some of these personal and social functions have been implicit in data from previous studies of children's school-based reading and writing (e.g., Fiering, 1981; Garrison & Hynds, 1991; Many, 1991; Rogers, 1991; Shuman, 1986), few were made explicit and many remained largely unnoticed. Although these researchers pointed out that children sometimes relate reading, writing, and personal experience, the nature and functions of such relations were seldom unpacked. This study began to unpack them. Additionally, we reported some functions of reading and writing that, to the best of our knowledge, had not been reported heretofore.

As our study shows, children can develop unique and complex reading and writing repertoires. These repertoires are often closely related to children's personal histories, and express their personal, social, and moral orientations within family, peer, school, and community life. Jamar, for example, began developing an understanding of various social problems, and he sought ways to inform and perhaps even transform other people's beliefs about these problems. And Tanya explored her own understandings of friendship, humanizing resoluteness, and morality through specific acts of reading and writing. Moreover, these acts led her to entertain the possibility of becoming a writer so that she could make public her new understandings and perhaps transform the attitudes of others.

Limitations of the Classroom Curriculum

In spite of what we view to be the strengths of the literacy pedagogy of the classroom that was the focus in this study, we also recognize that it suffered from several weaknesses. First, children were not encouraged to explore a very diverse range of discourse modes and genres. The children tended to read primarily fictional stories and autobiographies, and to write primarily expressive texts. Encouraging children to expand their genre repertoires might have broadened the range of their reading and writing, as well as their understanding of different modes of discourse. To help accomplish this, children's reading and writing practices could have been integrated with the content area classes that they took with other teachers.

A second limitation of the classroom pedagogy concerns the relative absence of teaching children how to gather information from a variety of sources and encouraging them to engage in writing practices beyond the walls of the classroom and the school. For example, children might have been encouraged to use their reading skills to collect information

about potential solutions to the issues that concerned them. Similarly, they might have been encouraged to address audiences other than their peers, such as distant friends and relatives, community leaders, or companies. In this regard, Stotsky (1987) has noted the value of writing to *public policy makers*, based on information gathered from independent research, as a way to teach students the nature and different purposes of public discourse.

A third limitation of the classroom pedagogy concerns the problem of balancing personal and social goals with academic goals. In spite of Vicki's efforts to integrate traditional reading and writing instruction with more personally and socially relevant instruction, she tended to place more emphasis on the latter. This is a bias common to many forms of so-called progressive literacy pedagogy. Although these forms of pedagogy highlight often neglected dimensions of literacy learning, they may result in a set of literacy activities that could be criticized for not giving adequate attention to certain basic skills requisite for academic achievement, to some dimensions of intellectual growth, and to the development of the language of formal schooling (e.g., Delpit, 1988; Reyes, 1992). Our work in this classroom suggests that striking an appropriate balance is perhaps a much more difficult task than many theorists of critical literacy would lead us to believe, involving as it does a sophisticated understanding of the complexity of children's lives, the effects on children of complex urban problems, and perhaps the development of yet to be discovered hybrid pedagogies.

Limitations of the Study

Our research of literacy in this classroom was also limited in several ways. First, based on the kinds of data we collected, we chose to conduct thematic rather than more categorical analyses of children's reading and writing and their functions. Had we systematically collected equivalent data on all children in the classroom, we might have been able to conduct more categorical analyses replete with interrater reliability checks. This might have allowed us to do a better job both at documenting trends and articulating individual differences in the children's "ways with words" and their concomitant functions. We hope to address this issue in future research.

Second, besides the obvious limitations of any single case study for generalizing, our findings are further limited by the fact that we studied a classroom that was unique in specifiable ways. In contrast to many other teachers in her school, Vicki enacted a self-styled form of critical pedagogy. Additionally, as a modified form of action research, this study provided the teacher with a set of human and material resources that

are seldom present in typical elementary classrooms. Neither this sort of support nor its effects could be replicated.

A third limitation of our research concerns the problem of impartiality given our role as action researchers. We might not have paid enough attention to negative cases, alternative interpretations, and individual differences. Although impartiality is a fundamental problem with all action research because such research entails a shift in attention from "looking at" social phenomena to "being in touch" with them (Shotter, 1993), we might have mitigated the effects of this problem by engaging in additional forms of triangulation. For example, although we had many informal conversations about children's literacy learning with parents, other teachers, administrators, and researchers, we could have been much more systematic in our documentation of the perspectives of others on both the processes and outcomes of children's engagement with reading and writing.

A fourth limitation of our research design has to do with our inability to assess objectively many of the possible effects of Vicki's instructional program on children's learning and motivation. We collected neither longitudinal data from the children's previous year in school nor data from other third/fourth-grade classrooms during the year of our study. Thus, we could not determine whether children did more reading and writing during their year with Vicki than in the previous year, or whether they read and wrote more than third- and fourth-grade children in other classrooms. Similarly, because we did not include either standardized or informal pretest and posttest measures of literacy learning and motivation, we could not determine systematically whether children's reading and writing improved or whether their attitudes toward reading and writing changed over the course of the year, even though we did collect a great deal of anecdotal evidence that suggested growth in these areas.

A fifth limitation of the study has to do with the problem of accounting for the relative causal influences of a variety of forces on children's developing literacy practices (e.g., the books to which children were exposed, the influence of peers, the influence of the teacher's socializing tactics, the influence of the attention paid to children by researchers, and the influence of parents who became increasingly involved in their children's engagement with reading and writing). In all honesty, we cannot account for the differential effects of these and other possible causal influences. Indeed, this is a thorny problem inherent in virtually all highly contextualized studies. On the one hand, we are not sure how we could simultaneously describe and interpret a complex and synergistic set of experiences within a dynamic community of practice and also operationalize specific variables in such a way as to partial out the effects of

discrete causal forces. On the other hand, we recognize that we might have been able to say more about the relative effects of various influences on children's literacy practices had we managed to construct more detailed maps of children's interactions with books, peers, teachers, researchers, and parents, as well as what children seemed to take from these interactions. However, the fact that we could not have predicted either the range of functions embodied in children's reading and writing or the diverse vocabularies that children used to express these functions suggests the value of more complex and nuanced accounts of the synergistic and dynamic nature of children's literacy learning in this classroom, as well as the limitations of more linear explanatory models.

Implications for Further Research

As is the case with most studies, this investigation raised a number of questions for future research. Although this study provided insight into some of the ways that children connected literacy with personal and social understanding, it remains a single study of a single classroom. Increased insight into this dimension of literacy might be gained from studying other teachers and classrooms in which communities are constructed and literacy practices conceived that grow out of and are responsive to children's personal and communal lives. Multiple case studies could provide us with better understandings of whether and why locally grounded literacy curricula function successfully, especially if such studies also present sufficient evidence on children's growth as readers and writers.

Although this study did not focus explicitly on Vicki's classroom as a specific community of practice, it did index the influence of classroom community on the ways that children appropriated certain practices of reading and writing. Future research might pay closer attention to the influence of classroom community on children's behavior and beliefs. Such research should probably include the careful documentation and analysis of the discourse patterns and participation structures that obtain between teachers and children, as well as among peers.

Future investigations might also examine more fully the extent to which the understandings children acquire as a result of their participation in a community of practice such as the one described in this study are brought to bear in other contexts. For example, it would be important to know whether children's differential appropriation of the values and practices of literacy encouraged in the classroom resulted in changing patterns of friendship and other peer relations. It would also be important to know whether writing about, reading about, and discussing racism or other social problems affected children's responses to actual

instances of these problems outside of school. At a more subtle level, it would be very important to know whether a focus on racism may have led the children to see themselves as victims of society, and discouraged their academic effort over time (Ogbu, 1986).

Finally, this study was conducted by researchers and a teacher who were not African Americans. Throughout the study, we attempted to speak and learn across race and class differences by spending a great deal of time with the children both in and out of the classroom (e.g., on the playground, in the community, and by sharing with them some of our interpretations of their practices, interview comments, and texts). Partially as a result of these efforts, we believe that we managed to generate a set of interpretations about the functions of children's reading and writing practices that are both plausible and arguable. However, in our interactions with the children, we did not really address the differences between us: differences related to race, class, age, or social role. Nor did we focus our research on the possible effects of these differences (e.g., to what extent children gave us the kinds of responses we were seeking or for which they were being rewarded). Consequently, we may have failed to notice or we may have downplayed some of the effects of these differences on our interactions with the children, and thus on the data that we collected from them. In future research, we hope to attend to the differences between the children and us by fostering dialogue about these differences and their possible effects.

Notwithstanding the limitations of the classroom we studied, the limitations of our research efforts, and the many research questions we might have pursued but did not, we have extended a domain of inquiry designed to understand more fully the relations between literacy and life. Specifically, we have highlighted the importance of exploring how literacy can function for children as a vehicle for imagining and participating in the world, how these functions can be cued up in fairly specific ways within specific communities of practice, and how children's appropriation of these functions, rooted as they are in unique biographies, is often complex and idiosyncratic. Doubtless, the relations between literacy and life involve much more than this. Among the goals of future research will be to thicken the plot we have begun to outline through this study.

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Note

Specifically, Mishler (1986) argues that traditional stimulus-response models of the interview process are essentially flawed in their requirement of standardization of meaning for questions and responses. Such a requirement fails to acknowledge "the ways that the meanings of questions and responses are contextually grounded and jointly constructed by interviewer and respondent" (p. 34). Alternatively, in conceptualizing interviews as jointly produced discourses, Mishler openly acknowledges the interviewer's participation in the respondent's construction of meaning. He describes the interview as a process that engages researchers and informants in continual reformulations and negotiations of questions and responses in order to arrive together at meanings that both can understand.

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Appendix

Analytic Framework: Personal and Social Functions of Children's Reading and Writing

I. Personal Functions

Functions Related to Present Recreational Interests

- * 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 Related to 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).
- * To begin to forge a moral code for one's self. May involve envisioning possibilities for civic participation.

II. Social Functions

Microsocial Functions: Understanding or Negotiating 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 problematic emotions and events involving social relationships in their lives.

Macrosocial Functions: Understanding and Addressing Social Problems and Issues

- * To become aware of, understand, or make others aware of social problems (e.g., racism, poverty, homelessness, violence, abuse of the environment, drug abuse).
- * To transform other people's values, attitudes, and beliefs with respect to these social problems