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

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BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE

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

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

Since the work of Britton and his colleagues, many researchers have employed, criticized, and extended their theoretical scheme of writing functions. In addition to the expressive, transactional, and poetic functions, children have been reported to use writing for a variety of other purposes, including experimenting with the styles of particular authors or genres (e.g., Gundlach, 1982; Whale & Robinson, 1978), framing an event to make it more important or business-like (e.g., Shuman, 1986), controling public interaction in order to get the floor, making a public statement or controling access to events (e.g., Fiering, 1981; Shuman, 1986), substituting for oral messages because of the absence of a listener, constraints against oral messages, or the embarrassment involved in oral transmission (e.g., Litowitz & Gundlach, 1985; Shuman, 1986), and affirming one's identity or one's sense of personal history (e.g., Dyson, 1988, 1989; Newkirk, 1989).

In addition to these studies on the functions of writing, research in the area of response to literature has provided some insight into the functions or purposes that students assign to their reading of literature. Although these studies have not explicitly

examined the functions that may underlie students' reading and responses to literature, examining the data provided by these studies (i.e., excerpts from students' interviews, students' written products, and transcripts of literature discussion groups) offers converging accounts of how students used reading to enhance interpersonal understandings, to reflect on and better understand their lives, to participate in the lives and experiences of fictional characters, to understand the limitations of their own world view, and to generalize from the world of the story to a larger social context (e.g., Beach, 1991; Eeds & Wells, 1989; Hynds, 1989).

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

Despite the dearth of empirical work in this area, there is a wealth of theoretical literature to support explorations of this sort. Britton (1982), for example, has suggested that written language can be a vehicle for reconstructing and shaping experience. Similarly, Bruner (1990) has proposed that the stories we read or compose "mediate between the canonical world of culture and the more idiosyncratic world of beliefs, desires, and hopes" (p. 52). Finally, Rosenblatt (1938) has described reading and literary experience as a means through which readers "seek to participate in another's vision—to reap knowledge of the world," as well as to "gain insights that will make [their] own li[ves] more comprehensible" (p. 7).

Theorists from within the growing field of critical literacy have also emphasized that literacy is not only the ability to understand or construct the conceptual meaning of written texts, but also the means through which individuals' understanding of themselves and their relationships to the world are progressively enlarged (e.g., Freire & Macedo, 1987; Gee, 1990; Giroux, 1988; Willinsky, 1990).

Grounded in these theoretical perspectives, the primary purpose of the present study was to describe and come to understand some of the personal, social, and political functions that underlie the reading and writing that young children do about themselves, their families and communities, and their culture. Although numerous studies of children's literacy from a range of theoretical perspectives have provided important insights with respect to the ways children understand and make sense of written language (e.g., Pearson, Barr, Kamil, & Mosenthal, 1990), comparatively few studies have examined the extent to which young children use reading and writing as vehicles for understanding or transforming themselves and their worlds. Without such understanding we stand to miss significant dimensions of children's literacy development, namely dimensions related to the possibilities that literacy might offer young children as they come to understand themselves, their peers, and the society in which they live.

METHOD

Students and the Classroom Context

The participants in the study were five third-grade children attending an inner-city elementary school. The K–5 school drew its students from the surrounding neighborhood—a community rich in African-American culture. As part of the study, we

worked with a classroom teacher from the school to develop and implement an alternative language arts program that involved children in reading and writing about themselves, their families, and their communities. Within this program, children often engaged in the following activities: independent self-selected reading of trade books, keeping journals of responses to their reading, shared reading and discussion of self-selected books or stories, writing about their families, communities and culture, sharing their writing with peers, participating in peer editing groups, and publishing a monthly in-class "magazine." In addition, at the beginning of the year, children planned and video taped a neighborhood tour during which they offered commentary about a variety of local landmarks that had particular meaning for them. Many of these landmarks became the subject of children's early writing about themselves, their community and their culture. In addition to these activities, the teacher also spent a portion of each day focusing on activities normally associated with basal reading and the language arts program adopted by the school district (e.g., grammar lessons, handwriting practice, vocabulary instruction and spelling).

Data Collection

Working as participant-observers, we visited in the classroom four days a month from November to May. During this time, we observed and took part in shared reading activities, individual and collaborative writing sessions and peer editing sessions. We also collected and made copies of the written work (stories, poems, essays, etc.) and the reading response logs of all students in the classroom. Finally, we chose five children for case study analysis. These five children were selected because, based on the reading and writing that they did early in the year, their work seemed to represent the range of the personal, social, and political functions enacted by all of the children in the classroom. These case-study children were not the best students in the class and they did not engage in more reading or writing than other children, but together they enacted a fairly wide range of personal, social and political functions in their reading and writing.

We conducted extensive, semi-structured interviews with each of the case-study children on a monthly basis, beginning on the fifth week of the study and continuing throughout the remainder of the school year. In all, each child was interviewed an average of five times over the course of the study. Interview questions were designed to elicit information about the ways in which specific texts that children read or wrote functioned in their lives. During each interview, a child was first asked to review the reading and writing in which he or she had engaged since the previous interview and to identify those books or "stories" that he or she wished to talk about. Copies of children's written texts and their reading response logs served as reminders of previous reading and writing that had taken place. Once a child had selected a text to talk about, the researcher asked the child a series of questions. Typical questions included: "Did you like this book?" "What did you think about when you were reading this book?" "How did reading this book make you feel?"

Data Transcription, Coding, and Analysis

At the conclusion of the study, we had observed approximately 52 hours of classroom literacy activities, collected 75 written products (stories, essays, or poems)

from the five case-study children, and conducted 25 interviews with those children. Transcripts of the interviews totaled approximately 400 typewritten pages.

Based on an extensive review of the literature about the functions of reading and writing enacted by children and adolescents, along with multiple reviews of children's interview transcripts using the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), we developed a taxonomy of some of the personal, social, and political functions of children's reading and writing (Kamberelis & McGinley, 1991, see Appendix A). All interview transcripts were then coded by one of the researchers using this taxonomy. Once all interview transcripts had been coded, 25% of the transcripts were coded independently by a second researcher. Interrater agreement was 92%. Disagreements were resolved by consensus.

The unit of analysis used for coding the transcripts consisted of a *comment* about a particular function that a child assigned to a text that he or she had read or written. These comments ranged in length from a few words to a few sentences. Multiple comments that appeared within the same interview, that were about a single text (i.e., a book or a child's composition), and that were associated with a single function were considered to be a single comment. For example if, within a single interview, a child mentioned several different times that he or she had identified with a hero in a particular book, the entire collection of comments was coded as a single token of "Exploring Possible Selves" (see Appendix A for full description of this category). However, when multiple comments associated with a single function appeared in reference to multiple topics or foci within a particular text or set of texts, the function was coded as having occurred more than once. For example if, within a given interview, a child talked about identifying with characters from several different books, each comment was coded as a separate token of "Exploring Possible Selves."

Coded interviews were analyzed descriptively for the proportions of different functions children assigned to their reading and writing. We analyzed the distributions of functions enacted by each case-study child, as well as the distributions of functions exhibited by the case-study children as a group. Finally, we conducted interpretive analyses of the children's interview comments.

RESULTS

The Functions of Reading and Writing

Interview transcripts contained a total of 341 comments associated with reading and writing functions. The top section of Table 1 provides information on the distributions of personal, social, and political functions enacted by the children in this study. As the table indicates, children engaged in reading and writing activities that allowed them to explore a wide variety of these functions. The overwhelming proportion of children's reading and writing was centered around personal functions (73.6%)—helping them to understand themselves, their problems, and their futures. A considerable proportion of children's reading and writing was associated with social functions (16.1%) such as affirming or transforming social relationships in their immediate worlds. Finally, children's reading and writing was also associated with political

Table 1

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

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

functions (10.3%)—helping them to understand or transform social problems and injustices.

A summary of the distribution of specific functions within the more general categories of personal, social, and political that were found to underlie children's reading and writing is presented in the bottom section of Table 1. The most commonly occurring specific functions are discussed below, along with excerpts from children's interview transcripts that serve to illustrate how children conceived of these functions. As the table indicates, the largest proportion of the reading and writing in which children engaged was associated with envisioning, exploring, or celebrating possible selves or role models (15.8%). One child (Jamar), for example, explained how *I Have a Dream: The Story of Martin* (Davidson, 1991) and *Encyclopedia Brown Gets His Man* (Sobol, 1982), functioned to help him envision possible roles and future responsibilities for himself:

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

The second largest proportion of children's reading and writing was associated with personal enjoyment or entertainment (15.2%). In response to reading *The Town Mouse and the Country Mouse* (Stevens, 1987), a book that he was most anxious to share with other members of his class, Edward elaborated on this function:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Children also associated their reading and writing with increasing their awareness or understanding of social problems and social injustices (6.5%). In response to reading *I Have a Dream: The Story of Martin* (Davidson, 1991), a book about the life of Martin Luther King, Jr., Jamar told us about how he found the book meaningful because it raised his awareness of the causes of racial conflict and racial problems:

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

In addition to using reading and writing to raise their own awareness of social injustice, children also used literacy (especially writing) to transform other people's values and beliefs about social problems (3.8%). Jamar, for example, explained how his piece entitled *Emergency,* a frightening story of a drug-related shooting that took place in this own home, functioned as a vehicle through which he might transform the values and attitudes of other people with regard to the first-hand violence he had experienced:

> [I wrote *Emergency*] because I think other people should know what happens, what happens around the world [innocent people being hurt or shot]. . . . Like people don't know what's happening to other people. . . . I would like them to know that its, we can, it can stop if we fight for it. . . . If we fight we can stop violence.

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

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

DISCUSSION

In the context of a single classroom, we examined the functions that five third-grade children associated with the self-selected reading and writing that they did about themselves, their families and communities, and their cultures. Our findings illustrate that these children used reading and writing for a range of personal, social, and political functions. Moreover, the children often associated multiple functions with a single book or written piece. Thus, although we have discussed the personal, social, and political functions of literacy as if they were independent of one another, in practice children often enacted multiple functions at once, integrating them in mutually supportive ways. For example, in the context of writing his essay, *Poor People,*

Jamar engaged in dealing with difficult emotions, forging a moral code for himself, and thinking about transforming others' attitudes toward homelessness.

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

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

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

Results from this study have a number of implications for understanding some of the personal, social, and political dimensions of children's literacy development, as well as for literacy pedagogy. The functions that children assigned to their reading and writing in this study suggest the need to expand our notions of literacy and its potential consequences beyond the simple ability to comprehend or communicate the conceptual content of a written message. As children in this study were involved in the process of constructing textual meaning during reading and writing, they were also, and perhaps more importantly, involved in the process of constructing their social identities and moralities—envisioning and exploring the possible roles and responsibilities they might assume as school children, as members of their families and communities, and as citizens in the larger society. Thus, these children enacted what many theorists of critical literacy have advocated, namely that the activity of "making meaning" through written language offers powerful possibilities for personal, social, and political understanding and transformation.

In addition to encouraging us to rethink our current conceptions of what it means to read and write, the results from the present study also suggest that we reconsider the purposes or reasons for which we engage children in reading and writing in school. It may be that language arts instruction that focuses primarily on the acquisition and production of textual meaning denies children access to significant consequences and

possibilities quite basic to the activities of reading and writing. Indeed, some of these consequences and possibilities were implicit in many of the literate functions discovered in this study. For example, children used reading and writing to understand and negotiate their own human experiences, to wrestle with vexing social and political issues, and to engage in efforts designed to transform their lives and their worlds.

With such consequences and possibilities of literacy in mind, we are led to underscore the importance of developing language arts programs that are personally meaningful, culturally relevant, and motivating. Indeed, we believe that by providing the children in this study with occasions to read and write about themselves, their families, their communities, and their culture, we catalyzed their efforts to explore a wide range of personal, social, and political functions in their reading and writing. And as they engaged in these functions, the children seemed to appreciate more fully the consequences and possibilities of being readers and writers.

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APPENDIX A

Taxonomy of the Personal, Social, and Political Functions of Reading and Writing*

I. *Personal: Present Recreational Functions*

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

Functions Directed Toward Present Problems

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

Functions Related to Possible Selves

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

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II. *Social Relationships: Functions Related to Celebrating and Transforming Social Relationships*

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

III. *Political: Functions related to Social Problems and Social Action*

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