

# TRANSFORMATIVE FUNCTIONS OF CHILDREN'S WRITING

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*Writing functions socially and politically in the lives of fourth-grade children who are encouraged to make their own experiences the subject of their classroom writing.*

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I picked up a pencil and held it over a sheet of paper, but my feelings stood in the way of my words. Well I would wait, day and night, until I knew what I wanted to say. Humbly now, with no vaulting dream of achieving a vast unity, I wanted to try to build a bridge of words between me and the world outside, the world which was so distant and elusive that it seemed unreal. (Wright, 1944, p. 135)

In this passage from his book, *American Hunger*, Richard Wright describes a moment of silence, a brief time when he was without appropriate words. He expresses his desire to use writing as a means of understanding his own experiences and connecting them to the wider world, and he describes the difficulty he once encountered in attempting to do so. He looks for a way of writing that might allow him to reveal himself to others while making sense of and even transforming his own way of living in the world.

Much like Richard Wright, the comments of 9-year-old Paul reveal the way in which writing can serve as a bridge between self and the world, providing insight into the functions that may underlie and motivate the writing children do in and out of school:

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I'm the same person, but I can write. . . . I can write about something that happened to one of my family. I can write about it now, but back then I couldn't write about it. . . . It makes a big difference to write because if you write about it and put it in a book, more people get to know about it. People that don't even know you. Like everybody can get the message that people over the world should stop using drugs. . . . I can't go everywhere telling the people to stop using drugs. Maybe they'll stop crack houses, and that's good enough for me.

In his comments, Paul discusses the importance of using writing to reflect upon and transform both himself and the world in which he lives. Writing helps Paul to discover new stances—new ways of “situating himself with respect to others and toward the world” (Bruner, 1990, p. 130). In discovering these new stances, Paul is actively engaged not only in constructing textual meaning but also in constructing himself as he explores the roles and responsibilities he might assume as a member of his family and his community.

In our conversations with Paul and other fourth-grade children with whom we worked during the 1990–1991 school year, we began to think about a number of issues related to how writing might function in children's lives in ways not typically afforded in many language arts classrooms. We wondered, for example, to what extent children might associate writing with learning to live in and understand their worlds. We also wondered how children might use writing to initiate, maintain, and change their relationships with other people. And finally, we were curious about how children might use writing to envision, explore, and enact visions of personal and community life that they found possible and desirable.

As we thought about the transformative possibilities that writing might offer young children, we found the work of a number of literacy theorists to be helpful. Bruner (1990), for example, has sug-

gested that the stories we compose “mediate between the canonical world of culture and the more idiosyncratic world of beliefs, desires, and hopes” (p. 52). Still others have emphasized that literacy is not only the ability to understand the conceptual content of written texts but also the means through which individuals’ understanding of themselves and their relationships to the world are progressively enlarged (e.g., Ferdman, 1990; Freire & Macedo, 1987; Gee, 1990; Giroux, 1988; Scollon, 1988;

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Willinsky, 1990). An assumption shared by all of these theorists is that written language can be a vehicle for shaping and reconstructing experience.

In addition to being guided by these theorists, we found the work of several literacy researchers helpful in understanding how children might use writing to understand and transform themselves, their relationships with others, and the world around them. These researchers have discovered that children use writing for a variety of personal and social purposes which include: experimenting with the styles of particular authors or genres (e.g., Gundlach, 1982; Whale & Robinson, 1978); framing or marking an event to make it more important or business-like (e.g., Fiering, 1981; Shuman, 1986); controlling public interaction, making a public statement, or controlling access to events (e.g., Fiering, 1981; Shuman, 1986); substituting for oral messages either because of the listener’s absence or because of the various constraints associated with oral discourse (e.g., Fiering, 1981; Litowitz & Gundlach, 1985; Shuman, 1986); and affirming one’s identity or sense of personal history (e.g., Clark & Florio, 1982; Dyson, 1989; Litowitz & Gundlach, 1985; Newkirk, 1989; Shuman, 1986).

In our own work in elementary school classrooms, we have observed children using writing for many of these purposes, as well as a number of others. In this article, we draw upon the writings of and our conversations with 3 particular children—Rosa, Anthony, and Paul—as they provide insight into how their writing was also associated with learning

to make sense of and transform human experience. We try to demonstrate how these children were involved in creating themselves, their social identities, and their visions for a better world at the same time that they were constructing textual meaning in the context of school-based writing activities. In sharing the talk and texts of these children, we also reflect upon traditional assumptions about why it is important for children to learn to read and write, which we view as a first step in thinking about better ways to help children connect reading and writing with their development as individuals, community members, and citizens.

### The Writers’ Community

The 3 children whose writing we discuss in this article were part of a year-long action research project in a fourth-grade classroom in an urban elementary school which drew its students from a neighborhood rich in African American culture. The children’s teacher, Victoria, invited us to collaborate with her in constructing a language arts program that, among other things, provided children with occasions to use writing in personally meaningful and potentially transformative ways. In her words, she wanted to develop a writing program that “would celebrate the children’s voices”—voices that she believed teachers must listen to and encourage. In addition, Vicki saw a need for children to participate in shaping their language arts class and to become active language users.

Throughout the year, we helped Vicki design a program that invited children in the classroom to write about themselves, their families, and their communities. We believed that these topics (as opposed to topics more commonly assigned in language arts curricula) would create occasions for children to use writing for a wide variety of personally meaningful and culturally relevant purposes.

We began this new writing program by helping the children plan and conduct a Neighborhood Tour (McGinley & Madigan, 1990), during which they introduced us to their community by identifying and commenting upon a variety of local landmarks that had particular meaning for them (e.g., churches, homes of relatives and friends, favorite restaurants, parks, abandoned homes, and local hang-outs). Throughout the tour, the children provided extensive commentary on the sites they had selected to show us. Interestingly, this commentary included historical information about featured landmarks, as well as information about the personal, communal, and politi-

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cal significance of these sites. Much of this information later became the subject of the first written pieces that the children composed.

As the children began to write, they were also encouraged to read books that were made available to them in their classroom. These books represented a wide range of genres and topics of interest to children. Their teacher also read many short stories aloud to the children and engaged them in discussions of these stories. Finally, she frequently involved children in instructional conversations about the nature of the authoring process (e.g., "What do authors do?"), as well as the purposes for which an author might have written a particular piece (e.g., "Why do you think this author wrote this story?").

As the year progressed, Vicki and her students adapted their classroom environment in ways that reflected their changing views of writing and the writing process. At the front of the room, the children created an Author's Chair where they could share their writing with the whole class. They also set up a sharing corner (a carpeted and pillowed area enclosed on three sides by cabinets and decorative walls, where small groups of students could read and share their writing with one another) and a writing corner (a long table that seated 4 or 5 students who often quietly wrote and discussed each other's writing as they worked). In addition, the children often chose to work collaboratively in adjacent desks around the room, frequently sharing and discussing their writing with one another.

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Vicki also initiated several changes to accommodate the new writing program. She set up a filing cabinet for children's writing folders. She placed open bins of lined and unlined paper on top of the filing cabinet, along with scissors, glue, and other materials that might be used for editing drafts. Finally, she designated certain areas of the room as resource centers for paperback books and dictionaries.

Eventually, the children decided to call their class the Writers' Community. Within this community,

they wrote and shared writing on a wide range of personal and community-related topics. Some of their texts were inspired by books that they had read, shared, and discussed. Other texts were inspired by their relations with friends and family members, by current events related to their own historical and cultural identities (e.g., Nelson Mandela's visit to America; Black History Month; the public television documentary "Eyes on the Prize"), and by a visit to a nearby university to meet and talk with the director of The Center for Afro-American and African Studies. A portion of each child's writing was published in a small student an-

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thology at the end of the school year. Finally, in the 1991–1992 academic year, all of the children read from their work during a Martin Luther King, Jr., Day celebration at a nearby university.

### The Children, their Talk, and their Texts

The children discussed in this article participated in all aspects of the Writers' Community. Over the course of the year, we had many informal conversations with them about their reading and writing, as well as more formal discussions about some of their favorite compositions. In our discussions with each child, we sought to understand the ways that writing was functioning in their lives. As we read their work and listened to them talk during numerous conversations, we began to understand more fully the aspects of their lives and their communities that they sought to affirm and embrace, as well as the aspects that they wished to transform.

*Rosa*

Rosa rarely voiced her opinion in discussions and interactions that occurred as part of the instructional activities of the day. In spite of her reluctance to join

in these activities, she had many friends who, in addition to her family members, were frequently the subjects of her writing. In what became Rosa's most emblematic work, "My Mom," the theme of family love was central. In this piece, Rosa attempted to affirm and strengthen the love she felt for her mother as she described a visit to the Ice Capades on her birthday and the auto accident that took place on their way home.

My mom is very sweet she treats me special. We have so many great times together like today. We went to the Ice Capades me and my family. We saw so many great things. We saw Mario and Luigi. We felt the ice. We saw Barbie in real life. We have so many great times together.

One day on my birthday we had an accident and I was crying. My mom was going to K-mart to get me a toy. And then some car came and hit her. They hit my mom and family. We all went up the hill. My mom said we all was very lucky that we didn't get hurt and that the car did not tip over and that we did not die. Thank you God we love you. Mom you are the greatest mom anyone can have. Love you.

*[Rosa] wanted to enlist the social support of others and felt that sharing her story might provide her with opportunities to do so.*

While Rosa's piece served to celebrate the love and affection Rosa felt for her mother, it also helped her externalize and make sense of her own feelings of guilt regarding the events of that day. In Rosa's words:

[I wrote the story] because I felt like getting it out. Getting this part out. The part about my momma and her getting, my mom, we all, about how they hit my momma badly. Because every time it was, everyday, I would wake up and think of it [the accident]. Then I was for sure I was gonna write about my mother and all my feelings.

It [writing about the accident] helped. It helped me to learn that, it helped me to learn that the day that my mother got hurt that she would be all right, 'cause she was telling me that she would be all right. . . . I thought it was my fault, because my momma was going somewhere to get me something. And then my auntie, and my cousins and my mother, and my little baby brother even told me that it wasn't my fault. [After I wrote] I felt like it wasn't any of my fault, really. It was just slippery, and the car slipped into us because it was, we was

goin' down a hill and this other car was turning, and then my mother stopped, and then the [other] car came, and then we all went up the hill.

In addition to using writing as a vehicle for dealing with her own emotional response to the auto accident, Rosa also used writing to reflect upon and reestablish for herself the security that was a part of her relationship with her mother and the feelings of mutual love and trust that she felt had been threatened as a result of the auto crash:

It [writing the story] made me feel good. I didn't think of it too much anymore about how it happened and I was so scared. It helped me think of my mother as always there for me when I need her, and it brought to me how it feels. [If someone else reads it] I would like them to know that me and my mom have great times together. And my family, that we spend lots of time together. It's important to me because I like telling about my mother a lot and how I would like a lot of people to know about that.

Besides using writing to transform her own feelings of guilt about the accident and to reestablish the sense of reciprocal love that existed between her and her mother, Rosa also used writing as a way to extend the boundaries of her relationships with her teacher and her classmates, creating a network of support that had not previously existed. Although she did not explicitly mention her guilt in her writing, she wanted to enlist the social support of others and felt that sharing her story might provide her with opportunities to do so.

I was thinking about putting that part in, but when I thought, I thought that people, some people would say "I don't know why she would put it in, or something, why she would want to put all of her private life in." I thought I'd put something in; I thought it wasn't too private because I just felt guilty. People in my class were telling me things. I decided not to put that in, but my friends were telling me "no matter what they say, its up to you."

We have a little corner [the "sharing corner"] where we read each other's stories and say stuff. . . . I thought when people started talking [about my story]. . . . I thought people in my class, I have a lot of friends and I thought they would help me figure, help me out with my problem.

When I had written the story, you know, I felt that it wasn't really my fault because my mother and Mrs. Rybicki and other people [peers] read it and talked to me and told me that it wasn't my fault. And I started thinking that it wasn't my fault either.

These comments suggest to us that, at some level, Rosa was aware of her decision to avoid mentioning anything about her feelings of guilt with regard to the accident, as well as of the fact that her written

piece might function as an invitation for members of her class to help her share some of her feelings. Indeed, her teacher and her friends did read her underlying message and rallied around her in support.

In sum, Rosa's engagement in writing and talking about "My Mom" functioned in multiple transformative ways—to work through her own emotional trauma in relation to the auto accident; to reestablish and perhaps to deepen her relationships with her mom and other family members; and to enhance the possibilities of obtaining social and emotional support from her teacher and her peers.

*Anthony*

Anthony frequently voiced his thoughts and opinions in class discussions. He became especially animated and articulate when these discussions focused on significant social issues and events in the surrounding community or beyond. Not surprisingly, Anthony often used writing for transformative purposes—to make personal sense of social problems and injustices, to make these problems and injustices public, and to invite others to engage in dialogue that might result in greater understanding of, and perhaps some solutions to, these problems and injustices. Probably the text that best represented Anthony's engagement in writing for transformative purposes was "Guns":

*Guns*

Guns are nothing to fool around with. Parents should hide guns away from children. Children shouldn't play around with guns anyway. So I think guns is no good at all. Some people have guns in our neighborhood. We can do something about it. I will do my best and to try my best to stop the guns in my neighborhood. I will guarantee you it will stop. It will stop!

It is a time to use guns. When you are a police officer it is OK to use guns. Guns do kill people but sometimes when people are used to guns they are lucky and don't get hurt. Some police get shot when they are on duty. That is so, so, so sad when they get shot on purpose.

Why is guns bad to our children? Some people think guns are for safety. I think guns are for protection. Some people sell drugs to get guns. I think guns is just a piece of trash. But if it wasn't for weapons people wouldn't get killed. But some people ask for peace but so you think they get it when they use guns? What do you think?

In many of our conversations with Anthony about his essay, it became apparent that he was trying to use writing to sort out for himself where he stood (or thought he ought to stand) on the issues of handgun violence and handgun control. The rhetorical shape of these conversations was usually similar to

the rhetorical shape of his essay. Anthony would shift back and forth across different ideological positions toward guns, often asking his peers, his teacher, or us where we stood on the issue.

Anthony's use of writing to forge his own stance toward handgun control was intimately related to his struggle to negotiate his roles within different social groups, particularly within his classroom and his extended family—two groups that held competing ideologies about guns. In relation to his role and status within his classroom, especially with respect to his teacher, Anthony told us:

Like I said in my story, if it weren't for weapons, police officers wouldn't have to use guns, 'cause it'd be peace. . . . Like Mrs. Rybicki [Anthony's teacher] told me that I should write a whole bunch about guns because like the police don't even know what to do about guns. Like she put it in my mind. . . . She told me like, police don't know about guns.

With respect to his relationships with family members, especially his grandfather who was a retired police officer, Anthony told us:

My grandfather talks to me about how it is a time to use guns in self-defense. . . . To keep peace sometimes, police officers need to use guns even if it's not great; or in self-defense it would be okay to use a gun, if someone else was messin' with you, might kill you. . . . Police officers think that guns is O.K. for self-defense. What should they [police] do? . . . The only thing I think is right to have a gun is if you're a police officer.

The juxtaposition of these two interview excerpts provides insight into how Anthony's attempts to forge an ideological stance toward handguns were in-

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timately related to the processes of establishing and negotiating membership and status within particular social groups. Importantly, writing became an arena for him to work through these ideological and social issues.

In addition to using writing to construct and reconstruct his own stance toward handguns and his positionings within different social groups, Anthony used writing as a vehicle for making his positions

public and for encouraging others to discuss this difficult social problem and potential solutions to it:

Like I thought I should write a whole bunch about guns because, uh, like the police don't even know what to do about guns. Police don't know about guns. What should they do? Should they put the people in jail or [let them] have guns in their house? It's probably all right to have guns in the house if you, no wait, if you know how to use them. So I think it's going to be like a good story that people can read.

It [my story] might help people. Like if their mothers have guns or if their fathers have guns, like uh the kids can sit around and talk to them like "we shouldn't use it" because you shouldn't use it that way, and other stuff about guns. I want police officers to read it. Like if a police officer reads it, I think they'll say this is a good story. I want him to come to us and tell us what we should DO! Like, uh, if it is all right with the gun. . . .

Central to Anthony's engagement in writing "Guns" and other essays was his belief that writing had the potential to transform community values and practices. Indeed, over the course of the school year, we had several conversations with Anthony about why he liked to write and what he thought it might accomplish. In one of these conversations he told us:

I'm trying to get across that guns are nothin' to be messin' with. Like, I wanted to sorta like change peoples' minds about guns, 'cause if they don't want to die, and they be messin' around with guns so they like want to die, 'cause they be messin' around with 'em, and they can kill 'em. And I just wanted to change their mind. But I don't think it's changed any minds, nobody's mind—YET! Maybe it did, maybe it didn't, but I, but I don't think it changed anybody's mind yet. But like, they might see our book [the student anthology] sitting there, and they might look at my page, and they might read it, and they might get interested in it. And they might, GET IT, and read it.

In sum, Anthony's engagement in writing and talking about guns functioned in multiple transformative ways—to work through his own ideological stance regarding guns, to negotiate membership and status within different social groups that held competing ideologies, to make public the issue of handgun-related violence in the inner city in order to promote problem-solving dialogue, and perhaps to transform community values and practices.

*Paul*

Paul was especially interested in a wide range of social and political issues related to life in his community. Perhaps more than any other student, Paul's writing consistently focused on relevant social and political problems that affected people both in his

community and beyond. In the first text that Paul ever wrote as part of the Writers' Community, he described the history of a neighborhood park: his early memories of the park, its present condition, and possibilities for its transformation in the future:

The Park

There was a park. The park was a place for boys and girls to play, but the gang came smoking pot. So then the kids stop come to the park and then the gang came. The police come to look out so the park can stay clean. But the park never stay clean. The kids like me and you can't go to the park. This is not fair to the kids like me. I hope this will stop soon.

*. . . writing for Paul became a way of assuming a literate social identity directed toward finding solutions to social problems that he saw were eroding his family, his community, and society itself.*

In writing "The Park," Paul was able to express his concern regarding the future of his community. With respect to this concern, Paul's writing functioned as a vehicle for making sense of the changes he had observed in the park, as well as alerting his fellow students to his view that these changes were detrimental to community life. In our conversations with him, Paul often discussed how he hoped that his writing would motivate other readers to think about taking steps to restore the park to a place "where boys and girls [could] play [again]."

While Paul's inclination to use writing to envision community change was clearly present in "The Park," the transformative purposes that motivated his writing were most apparent in his essay, "Enslaved." As our conversations with Paul revealed, he came to regard this text as representative of how writing could be used to transform social practices and ideologies. In writing "Enslaved," Paul made use of his knowledge of African American history to draw parallels between the institution of slavery and the influence of the drug culture on African American young people today:

Enslaved

Slavery was unfair because they was beaten and taken from their family. And I bet that the hardest part is to be taken away from your family because they took care of you since you was born. And most of the white people did not care about how the slaves felt. Those white peo-

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ple was too lazy and they wanted to take the slaves from their home in Africa.

All the slaves was on a ship. The ship was no bigger than the classroom. The slaves was dying because if somebody got sick then the others will get sick and they will die too. When they made it to the south they was to sign a contract to do service for twenty years but they got tricked to serve for life! I don't think that is fair, do you? But that's how it was.

Now, I want to tell you about Nelson Mandela. He was a leader in Africa. He showed them the right way for a long time. Then he went to court and lost the case and he was in jail for twenty-seven years. He's out now in 1990. He is all around the world. I'm glad he's out to turn the idea of Blacks getting along with Whites the right way.

Now I want to tell you about Harriet Tubman. I learned this in a book and in a story that my teacher read to our class. Harriet was a slave since she was 4 years old. She had to take care of one, two, and three-year-olds when she was only four or five years old herself. And if she didn't do right she will get beaten with a belt or whip. When she got older she would get locked in a box for a lot of hours or for a day. I know Harriet was treated bad but the White people didn't have no feeling for slaves. They had no feeling for slaves. All they wanted was they house to get cleaned and some of the slaves didn't no how to read. Some of the slaves had to sneak to learn to read.

Back to the story. The part I didn't like was when she had got hit in the head with a weight. She was out for a week then she was not feeling right. Nobody wanted her but she started the underground railroad. She made it to the free side but she was not happy because she was thinking about her family. She went back to the South to free her family. She tricked everybody on the south side and they wanted her dead or alive but they cannot find her but her and her family was free.

But you are still a slave to drugs because drugs can make you a slave. Say like I was on drugs I will be a slave. Because drugs is telling me what to do. Drugs can be harmful. There are steroids crack pot weed alcohol and cigarette. Back to the point how can drugs effect your life. They can kill you, in a day or probably a week. I don't see why people do drugs it's killing our city. People killing each other over crack. You are an addict to crack. You're robbing and killing smoking and dealing. Crack is stupid. But people think it is fun, and they get high off it. It's making people go and kill other people. Because drugs is telling them what to do. I hope that the world will stop killing because I don't want my family get killed over drugs. Because I will die before my family.

Three themes of transformative possibility were embedded within Paul's essay. First, he underscored the potential role of the family to transform the lives of individual family members by providing basic material needs, emotional support, care, and love. He developed this theme by describing how slavery disrupted and even destroyed many African American

families, and he contrasted this problem with a story about how Harriet Tubman had managed to free and reunite her family and the families of other African Americans through the establishment of the Underground Railroad. Second, Paul noted the possibilities for social and cultural transformation inherent in the struggle for racial harmony. To give substance to this theme, he drew upon the politics of Nelson Mandela and his visit to America and other nations. Third, Paul emphasized the transformative possibilities of recognizing the dangers inherent in drug abuse, dangers that could threaten individual freedom as well as family cohesion. He drove this point home with rhetorical effectiveness by drawing a parallel between the historical institution of slavery and the present-day potential of drugs to enslave its users.

These three themes were central in nearly all of Paul's writing and in his conversations and discussions with his friends, his teacher, and us. For example, in a set of comments culled almost at random from various interview transcripts, Paul explicitly acknowledged his intentions to embed these themes in his writing:

In my story I think I was trying to explain, to say something about the family [in times of slavery], because they took care of you, fed you, clothed you, had a house, had a roof over our heads. And then all of a sudden somebody would come and take it all away from you and have you working out in a corn field somewhere. I was thinking about like what if my aunt and uncles were in this position, of being a slave, or my grandma or grandmother, or my grandmother's mother. . . .

First I wrote my feelings to show other people how it was . . . to show kids how it was back before our parents were born, and before we were born. And I wrote it mostly so they can get around prejudiced people like the Ku Klux Klan. We can turn around, and we can join each other. It's like this because the color of our skin. Like if we take off our skin, we both look . . . if we take off our skin, we look the same way. . . .

When someone reads my story I like them to think about it. And if they're on drugs, I'd like them to think about it and see how they could turn theyself around, and become a normal person like my uncle. Um-hmm, it's like a new version of slavery. What if drugs is telling you what to do and stuff. And you gonna do it! It's a different version. It's still the same. You could get like addicted to it and then you could do like stupid stuff 'cause it's telling you what to do. . . .

Like, I wrote my story because I don't want anyone in my family to use drugs, cause my uncle he was using drugs, but he helped his self. He went to this clinic and he stayed there for a couple of. . . he stayed there for five months. Now he only smokes cigarettes. He don't drink nothin'. He recovered his self. And he be at meet-

ings and stuff, and he's havin' speeches and stuff. They can't be doin' it anymore, and stuff like that.

In "Enslaved" and in related conversations, Paul consistently articulated his visions for transforming family and community life. Like Anthony, writing for Paul became a way of assuming a literate social identity directed toward finding solutions to social problems that he saw were eroding his family, his community, and society itself.

### Writing as Transformative Practice: What We Learned from the Children

We began this article by suggesting that the transformative functions of children's writing had not been explored sufficiently. We further suggested that without an understanding of these functions we stood to miss important aspects of children's literacy development. We continue to believe these things. In fact, as we read and reread the texts and interview transcripts of Rosa, Anthony, and Paul, we came to realize that we had initially underestimated the rich and diverse ways that children use writing to understand and transform themselves, their social relationships, and their worlds. Indeed, our involvement with these children helped us to contextualize our initial theoretical notions about the transformative possibilities of children's writing. Rosa and Anthony, for example, provided us with insight into how writing can help children make sense of com-

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plex social issues and difficult emotions rooted in social relationships. Furthermore, Rosa showed us how writing can be used to restructure social relationships to elicit understanding and support from a wider range of people, and Anthony demonstrated how writing can be used to promote dialogue aimed at solving complex social problems. From Anthony and Paul we learned how writing can be used to envision new social practices that may contribute to solving community and societal ills. Finally, all 3

children helped us understand how writing can be used to explore new social identities, roles, and responsibilities.

Although our primary purpose in discussing the writing of Rosa, Anthony, and Paul was to reveal some of the possibilities that writing may offer young children, the uses of writing demonstrated by these 3 children taught us a great deal about the importance of humanizing literacy learning and teaching. As we reflect back on the year during which we worked with these children, we are struck by the simplicity of the program that helped the children connect writing with their development as individuals, community members, and citizens. Indeed, Vicki was right about the value of listening to and celebrating children's voices. She was also right about the importance of engaging children in thinking about the meaning of "authorship," as well as the value of allowing children to participate in the shaping of their language arts program.

Fortunately, our decision to invite children to make their own lives and experiences the subject of their school-based writing proved to be a good instructional choice because it encouraged children to view writing as a form of social and political practice. Beginning the new writing program with a neighborhood tour was also a fortuitous instructional choice: The tour provided an anchor for much of the writing, thinking, and social dialogue that was to follow. Finally, providing children with a forum for discussing, reworking, and eventually publishing their texts proved to be an important motivational element of the Writers' Community that helped to sustain the excitement and energy with which it began.

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