Re-embedding “Disembedded” Visions of Young Children’s Writing Development

by

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What factors influence the choices young writers make in the urban primary classroom setting? Their social worlds, for one, argues Anne Haas Dyson in this 1988 Quarterly piece, but there are also other, more complex influences, she adds in her afterword. Dyson is a researcher for the National Center for the Study of Writing and Literacy and professor of English, Language, and Literacy at U.C. Berkeley.

Picture a lone writer weaving words into a lush text. That image has for some time guided our discussions of writing development and developmental teaching; it seems to capture our hope for our students — that they might sit alone, weaving words into texts for literate strangers, texts that are able to exist “on their own,” sensible to any reader in any setting.

To so envision mature writing is tempting, especially when we observe young children writing. A child’s written text is often sensible only to those who observed its original production. For example, 5-year-old Sara’s firmly written “NO” exists amidst a drawing of a little girl poised nervously at the end of a diving board; her no has quite a different meaning than the equally firmly written no of Regina, also 5 years old, who angrily hands her “NO” to an aggravating older cousin. The children’s print is meaningful within the context of the activity they are participating in — creating a story, carrying out a silent fight. To develop as writers, we are quick to point out, Sara and Regina must learn to “disembed” or “decontextualize” their written texts: They must be able to flesh out their meanings in words, to make them sensible to non-present readers.

There is another way, though, to conceptualize the challenges facing Sara and Regina. This alternative conception adds new dimensions to our vision of the developing writer. They are the dimensions of developmental time and of social or interactional space. From this perspective, to develop, children’s writing must become progressively more embedded in their social and intellectual lives. That is, children must come to view texts, not as mere representations of meaning, but as places where meaningful social interactions can occur.

Let me explore these notions of “embeddedness” and “disembeddedness.” I will draw upon a longitudinal project I have been working on, on writing development, funded by the Center for the Study of Writing. I begin with a consideration of a currently very popular theoretical perspective, that of the Russian developmental psychologist Lev Vygotsky. From there, I consider children’s use of writing — and drawing and talking — in early schooling. And, finally, I discuss the implications of this developmental picture for how we as teachers support writing’s growth.

The Theoretical Perspective: Embedding Zones of Proximal Development

The Vygotskian (1978) concept of the “zone of proximal development” figures into many current discus-
sions of writing development and developmental teaching, as does a related notion from child language studies, that of “scaffolding” (Bruner, 1983). These concepts have provided theoretical substance for valued instructional techniques, like teacher and peer conferencing, for external action. Thus, to become fully engaged in the process of becoming writers (or readers), children must experience through literacy activities some of the interactional possibilities that motivate the fully initiated.

And, indeed, when we consider literacy’s beginnings in the home, we see young children introduced to written language within familiar, interaction-rich activities. Consider, for example, a grocery list at the center of family menu planning, an illegible phone message or returned check surrounded by a family argument, a letter to Grandma evolving amidst parent-child planning, or an “I love you” note that elicits an oral response and a hug. Within the context of talk-filled activities, children learn of print’s social significance — its capacity to affect how people behave toward each other. That is, through collaborating with others in literacy tasks, children are learning not only about literacy processes, but, more importantly, about the relationships that are enacted by those processes.

The “zone” is defined by a child’s performance on a particular activity; it lies between what the child can do on his or her own and what the child can do while collaborating on the task with a more capable other. For example, in writing conferences, the adult guides the young writer through a routine for planning or reconsidering text. The adult models procedures and focuses and extends the child’s efforts. Gradually the socially-enacted routine is transformed by the child and becomes a tool for the child’s internal (mental) enactment of the activities of planning or revising texts (or at least for planning or revising particular kinds of school texts for the adult teacher).

As suggested by the parenthetical comment above, zones of proximal development are not located on isolated highways, upon which adults then abandon children to fend for themselves. For the Vygotskian notion is not that children grow away from others but that they are socialized into the intellectual life of the community. In the words of the Soviet psychologist Leont’ev (1981, p.47), “The human individual’s activity is a system in the system of social relations. It does not exist without these relations.” Behaviors that are transformed into internal processes raise new possibilities toward each other. That is, through collaborating with others in literacy tasks, children are learning not only about literacy processes, but, more importantly, about the relationships that are enacted by those processes.

The School Context:
Embedding Literacy Growth in Peer Social Life

Children entering formal schooling will have had varied degrees of and varied kinds of literacy experiences. School will offer some children their first opportunities to engage with extended written language. And yet, in crowded classrooms with one adult and many children, it is the children themselves who best capture each other’s attention. As Vivian Paley said about preschooler Mollie, so we could say about most young school children: She “discovered that the things she most wants to learn will be revealed by other children, not by me. In particular, she wishes to find out how children grow in connectedness . . .” — how they become peers, friends (1986, p. 32).

In the urban magnet school in which I observed for three years, the children were indeed interested in each other. Their mutual friendships were supported in part simply because they were in a small school.
The kindergarten, first/second grade, and second/third grade class not only shared the playground, the lunchroom, and the library. They also shared the same three teachers, including their language arts teacher, Margaret. And they also engaged in the same language arts activity throughout their early school years, journal drawing and writing. Most of their writing was imaginative, in their words, "stories."

Margaret herself nurtured a classroom climate in which children's interest in each other was not only sanctioned but encouraged. She expected the children to share experiences, ideas, and, at times, possessions (like taking a turn at bringing snacks). During journal time, she accepted their chatter as the normal by-product of children together, and she gave them opportunities to formally share their work. And she herself modeled the respectful yet sometimes inquisitive stance of the appreciator of art and story.

Thus, the children's relationships with each other grew through the talk surrounding their academic tasks, including the journal activity. And it is these relationships that, for many of the children, provided a key to literacy growth. Their relationships were not that of expert-novice, although certainly the children varied in expertise. But, compared to most studies undergirded by a Vygotskian perspective, their relationships were more equal and motivated primarily by a desire for each other's company and recognition, rather than by a desire or compulsion to "teach" or "learn" something (Dyson, 1987a). Nonetheless, their intense interest in each other provided fertile ground for literacy growth — for discovering the interactional possibilities of literacy. Just as the social routines jointly enacted by adults and children foreshadow individual children's efforts, so too can those social interactions enacted by peers.

To illustrate how the observed children's spontaneous interest in each other supported their discovery of writing's social power, I turn first to talk about drawing — because the children themselves attended to the meaning of each other's drawing before they attended to the meaning of each other's writing.

As others have observed in different settings, much (although not all) of children's talk during writing was focused on encoding their messages — messages that often depended in some ways upon their drawings (e.g., Graves, 1982). Encoding took great effort — and most talk about writing centered on spelling.

Drawing, on the other hand, was initially a much more comfortable medium of representation, and its meaning was more immediately accessible to a curious peer. Moreover, that drawing was often surrounded by audible talk, as children labeled and elaborated upon the meaning of those drawings; this talk too engaged the interest of peers.

As the children talked about drawing, a dialectical relationship evolved between individual children's activity and their social talk; this relationship could potentially give children's symbolic worlds a role as social mediators. That is, drawings could become social tools. Consider, for example, the following interaction between Jake and Regina. Jake, a second grader, overhears first grader Regina's self-directed talk as she draws and tells a story about a little girl. Regina refers to the girl, who is dressed in a pink shirt and a brown jumper, as a Brownie. Jake first teases Regina and then critiques her drawing. But, in the end, he becomes quite interested in the real world experiences behind Regina's efforts:

Jake: (teasing) You're a Brownie! You're a Brownie!

Jake, who enjoys language play and who is himself of mixed Black/Anglo ethnicity, seems to be teasing Regina about her skin color. But Regina does not understand and responds quite indignantly.

Regina: No, I'm a Girl Scout.


Regina: So do Girl Scouts.

Jake: You delivered any cookies?

... [omitted data]

Regina: (talking to her work) She's [the drawn girl] wearing a pink shirt with stripes. They have to [all the Brownies have to] wear the same thing.

Jake: They can't wear pink shirts.

Regina: They can wear pink shirts with stripes. I was four and I always wore this stuff. We sold popcorn.
Jake: OOOoh. Popcorn is yummy.

Regina: We had cheese and ice cream,

Jake: OOOOOoh.

Regina: chocolate fudge, and we had chicken. I had French fries. [And on Regina goes, telling Jake about the pleasures of being a Brownie.]

Through the above interaction, Regina’s symbolic world supported and was supported by the social world. Jake was interested in his peers and their activity, and so he was interested in Regina’s activity. The interaction led to a sharing of experiences and joint pleasures — popcorn, cheese, and ice cream — and an exchange of opinions about the logic of Regina’s efforts. That is, talk about Regina’s symbolic world led the children to reflect about experiences in the wider world of people, places, and things. Through their talk in the social world they shared, Regina’s private symbolic world gained real world relevance for both children.

In time, the children’s social talk began to focus more on the content of each other’s writing. Certainly Margaret encouraged the children’s attention to text. She read their journal entries and reacted especially enthusiastically to amusing stories or to ones with interesting words in them. But children’s attention to text content was also assisted by their very vocal struggle with spelling words. One child might overhear another child reread his or her text; and, although that rereading peer was focused on remembering and spelling a message, the listening peer might react to the sense of the read message. Just as Regina’s talk about a drawn Brownie gave rise to social talk, so too other children’s read or recited texts led to talk about such topics as the age at which mothers have babies, whether or not bombs can make volcanoes — or even the writers’ own goodness:

Mitzi has worked intensively on a large, carefully detailed picture of a mean-looking witch. She is quite pleased with her drawing, remarking that it is her “favorite story.” She now begins to write:

Once there was a witch. She is my mom.

Jenni and Bessie, who are sitting nearby, attend to Mitzi’s rereading of her story.

Jenni: I have a witch mother.

Mitzi: What?

Jenni: I have a real witch mother. My mother’s a friend of a witch.

Mitzi: A bad one?

Jenni: No, a good one/bad one.

And Jenni talks for a while about her mother and her witch friend. Mitzi soon returns to her text. She may be feeling uneasy about referring to the witch as her mother, for she writes:

I love my mom.

Bessie and Jenni seem to be concerned about Mitzi’s text as well:

Bessie: You shouldn’t share it [with the class].

Mitzi: She’s a bad witch [pointing to her picture].

Jenni: Then you’re a bad girl.

Perhaps a little girl who writes that her own mother is a witch is a bad girl indeed, from Jenni’s point of view. Mitzi seems to interpret Jenni’s statement similarly:

Mitzi: No, I’m not. I might not even like my mom, or I love my mom.

At this point, Mitzi draws a conversation bubble next to her drawn witch and writes:

I am bad.

There were at least two important lessons for Mitzi in this exchange — and for me as observer as well. Together, these lessons illustrate a critical concept about writing: written language does not just represent meaning; it has social consequences.

The first lesson was that a written text can lead to a sharing of experiences in the ongoing social world. The limits of such text-related talk have been noted in the literature — the children are not analyzing the text itself but rather using the text as a cue to sharing and reflecting on personal experience (Hilgers, 1986;
Newkirk, 1982). Nonetheless, through such talk, children are learning an important way in which texts figure into the life of a literate community — texts stimulate talk and thus help people discover or create common ground (Heath, 1986).

The second lesson is that written texts can lead to social judgments about the knowledge and even goodness of the author. (If readers doubt that, they might read the book reviews in recent issues of The Quarterly — or any other journal.)

A written text can lead to a sharing of experiences in the ongoing social world.

As the children progressed from the kindergarten through the third grade, most gradually learned these lessons. For example, the children began to call attention to their written texts rather than only to their drawings; and so “Listen to thisy” occurred along with “Look its.” And “That’s not truey” and “That wouldn’t happeny” could be heard along with “That doesn’t look like a lion.” To further illustrate, children sometimes included peers’ names in their texts — a very effective means for gaining others’ attention. Children could thus play with their friends in their texts — and outside of them, as the texts stimulated the sharing of laughter and talk. Some children became known among the peer group for certain journal themes. Choosing to write a particular kind of story could be a way of proclaiming one’s solidarity with — or desire to be accepted by — a particular child or group of children. (For a more thorough discussion of these ideas, see Dyson, 1988.)

The values and expectations a group evolves as readers of and responders to text can in turn guide individual members’ efforts as authors of texts. A dialectic thus evolves between the writing efforts of individuals and the responses of others. Throughout our lives, the responses others give to our behaviors enlarge our appreciation both of the social world within which we live and of the power of our own individual behavior (Vygotsky, 1978).

And so too in this classroom, individual children began to spontaneously articulate their concerns about others’ responses to their efforts. For example, one day Jake had begun a story about sharks. He momentarily panicked, however, when he realized that he already had written three sentences: Margaret asked that the children write at least three sentences, and, for Jake, the minimum often constituted the maximum. In this case, though, Jake did not stop writing because “people wouldn’t know what happened to the sharks!”

The point here is not simply that Jake was now carrying out as an individual the sort of self-evaluation that his peers and his teacher had heretofore done for him. The point rather is that Jake’s conception of the writing task had changed: He was now not only representing his meaning — he was engaging in a social act, and he knew it. His new command of writing had been supported by and was now supporting relationships that very much mattered to him.

Pedagogical Implications:
Creating and Maintaining Relationships Around and Through Writing

This essay began with a vision of a lone writer creating an autonomous text. As the essay has developed, I have aimed to add new dimensions to this portrait of a writer: the dimensions of developmental time and interactional space. For individual writers are sustained by a human network of relationships, built up gradually over time. Through these relationships young writers come to understand the social actions embedded in particular literacy activities. Thus, through their relationships with each other, relationships supported by Margaret, the observed children were gradually adopting the social stance of writers of story worlds — the children were learning that story writers woo and cooperate with story readers, who have certain expectations that must be met.

This vision of writing development suggests that interactions among teachers and children and among children themselves matter not only because they may help individual children gain independence as writers. They are important too because through them the child may build relationships with others wherein writing matters. In this sense, young children’s talk about personal experience that is stimulated by writing may be developmentally as significant as talk about writing process or product; through such talk, children may discover writing’s power to help people discover commonality and appreciate variation in experience.
Similarly, this developmental view enriches our appreciation of writing activities purposefully designed to enrich human relationships. For example, conversational writing, such as journal writing (when it is read and responded to), may not be important for young children simply because it may lead to fluent writing. Nor does its significance lie only in the sort of modeling and scaffolding it provides for young writers. It is important because it may help children establish relationships with other people that are sustained through writing. That is, "dialogue" writing may help children learn what it feels like to be a writer with something to say to somebody (for information about "dialogue" writing, see Staton, 1988).

And so I end this essay for *The Quarterly*, alone in my small living room, late at night, struggling with the words of a (not so lush) text. As I close, I reflect, as I have been throughout this essay, on the children I have observed, the students with whom I plan to discuss these ideas, the colleagues whose reactions I am trying to anticipate. There is a network of human relationships crowded into this small room with me. If there were not, I would not be here either.

**Afterword**

"Then you’re a bad girl," said Jennie to Mitzi, a 7-year-old frequently put-out with her mother (who’d gone and given her a baby brother). This indictment was given, this "bad girl" identity assigned, because Mitzi had written that her mother was a witch — a "bad witch," she had specified. The children’s exchange, I said 7 years ago, exemplifies childhood lessons about writing.

Those lessons illustrate how composing and texts can mediate children’s social lives, their relationships with others. Thus, Mitzi’s mother-witch had entered into a dialectic with the social life around it, a dialectic that highlighted the symbolic potential and the social consequences of composing choices. Through such an embedding of child writing in child social life, children may learn “that story writers woo in and cooperate with story readers, who have certain expectations that must be met.”

"Must be met." Mmmmm. Maybe, "must be responded to." I see these issues of others’ expectations, and of identity, in more complex ways now. This new complication results from a new dimension, a new angle, so to speak, on children and their writing. In addition to the dimensions of developmental time and of interactional space, I add that of ideological space.

That new dimension is informed, not only by children like Mitzi, but also by language philosophers, especially Bakhtin (1981), who is cited more often now than in 1988. In his view, texts (like the "witch story") not only mediate between writers and their audiences, they also mediate between writers’ own psyches and the meanings available in the social world. As Bakhtin (1981) explained, we don’t learn words from dictionaries; we learn them from "other people’s mouths, in other people’s contexts" (p. 294). When we enter into those contexts ourselves, as speakers or writers, we are expected to appropriate certain words, given the prevailing ideology, that is, given the prevailing assumptions about our social place as children or adults, students or teachers, women or men, as people of varied roles, status, and disposition.

As children learn to participate in their social worlds, then, they negotiate with available words, adopting, stretching, or resisting them. Their choices of topics, characters, and plot events, their ways of interacting with others — all say something about their relationship to the social world and, also, to the ideological world. Thus, children may choose or reject ways of writing that they judge ‘boyish’ or ‘girlie,’ ‘rad’ or ‘sweet,’ ‘cool’ or ‘boring.’

Take, for example, Tina, another “bad” girl. As I detail in new stories (e.g., Dyson, 1994, 1995), Tina responded to — but did not always meet — others’ expectations. And her responses, and her complication of classroom storylines, had to do with her identity as a working class girl of color in a classroom in which gender, race, and class were played out both literally and figuratively in children’s dramatized compositions.

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Tina responded to female exclusion from superhero stories with tales of “tough” girls. She responded to the exclusive existence of white goddesses with Venus Tina, a Black goddess who came down from the heavens to “save parks for us kids of the world.” She was not a consistent social activist, but she changed the story landscape in her classroom — and inspired many a complex discussion about the nature of good, evil, and power.

Tina, I thought, was good. But she thought she was “bad” although, for Tina, the word meant, to quote Smitherman (1994, p. 53), “powerful” and “tough”. Understanding some of the complexities of modern childhood — as well as new dimensions of writing — will entail stories, like that of Tina, stories that place individual children in the context, not just of ongoing social interaction, but of the ideological landscape of the classroom as a whole.

And this is what I am trying to do, as I sit here, still in the same small living room, still waiting ‘til after midnight to get words on the page. There are, though, different books on my table — less of Vygotskian theory, of symbol development and cultural anthropology; more of cultural studies and popular culture, of poststructuralists on identity and critical theorists on schooling. But there are still piles of to-be-read student papers, of to-be-analyzed children’s transcripts, of to-be-responded-to messages from friends and colleagues. These latter piles, and the relationships they sustain, remain the reason for remaining...

References


