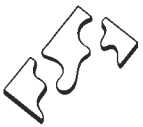

On Meaningmaking and Stories: Young Children's Experiences of Texts[1]

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Introduction

"Well, see," said 5-year-old Sasha, "it just happened one day and suddenly it felt like 'Yippee, I CAN READ,'" and he threw up his arms and laughed, "and it made me feel different inside my tummy. I felt kind of powerful."

"I remember when I knew I could read," 6-year-old Toby told me, "It was when I first moved into this house—a couple of days after I moved here and I remember *that day*, it was in the *middle* of the day and I *did* like it—'cos it makes you feel confident—like you can do more things when you do it."

What does literacy mean to a young child, and how can we come to understand the child's perspective of reading and the child's experience of stories? For a young child, the world is storied, peopled by dragons and witches, wizards and Hobbits; her lifeworld is filled with drama and infused with possibilities of other worlds. Why then do we assume that reading begins with alphabetization, that it is a set of observational skills, to be developed in isolation from story, from engagement, from the drama of lived experience?

Child-Life as Storied

In his essay "The Storyteller," Walter Benjamin (1969) laments the decline of the communicability of experience and points out that dramatic narrative has gradually disappeared from living speech. Experience, he tells us, has fallen in value, giving way to the rise of information which lays prompt claim to verifiability. Reading scores, grade level assessment, student-reader strategies, and comprehension as measured by workbook decoding skills, can all be evaluated and debated within the input-output taxonomic models that swarm over our pedagogical landscape. But where does this lead us? A taxonomy of reading skills or a meta-analysis of reader strategies might measure skills and objectives and strategies, but it cannot tell us about the experiential world of the child or the storied lifeworld of childhood, which we vitiate as we rob children of "storyness" in their school reading curricula, for "it is as if something that seemed inalienable to us, the securest amongst our possessions were taken from us: the ability to exchange experiences" (Benjamin, 1969, p. 83). It is the ability to exchange experiences with Dorothy

and the Strawman, with the little boy and his velveteen rabbit and with Tigerflower where everything is turned around and nothing is the way it should be or the way it once was. Yet children, who from earliest babyhood have struggled to name the world, are robbed of the world and instead we present them with tasks, objectives, and skills to be mastered, and we term that classroom literacy! Yet how do children experience reading? What do they think about their world of words? What does reading mean to a young child entering kindergarten and encountering, perhaps for the first time, a formalized curriculum designed to teach the Word?

I was curious, and at the same time astonished, that I could find very little in the reading literature that sought the child's perspective of reading. There is a burgeoning literature of adult-centric theories drawn from behavioral and cognitive development traditions. There are numerous studies dealing with how and why children use certain strategies to perform reading tasks—but nowhere did I hear the child's voice, articulating his perspective on the question.

I decided to ask young children to describe their experiences for me. I began with four five-year-olds—four friends who became my wise informants. The children attended the same public school kindergarten in the morning and the same child care center in the afternoon. Thus it is with Sasha, Toby, Liz, and Laura that another vision of lived literacy begins. As Gareth Matthews points out so wisely in his *Dialogues with Children*: "What has not been taken seriously, or even widely conceived, is the possibility of tackling with children, in a relationship of mutual respect, the naively profound questions of philosophy" (1984, p. 3). Similarly, what has not been taken seriously in our current national literacy crisis, are young children's perspectives. What follows is an interpretive account of children's reflections on becoming literate.

The Interview Setting

I arranged to speak with each of the children at home, alone. The rituals that we set up—of owning the tape, operating the tape recorder, and shaping the interview were critical to the participatory atmosphere. Each child wrote his or her name on the cassette tape and carefully dated it. The tape was theirs. I promised to return what they made at a later date. Toby, Liz, and Laura all chose to be interviewed in their own rooms. Sasha chose the living room as we were alone in the house and he wanted to eat snacks during our interview. I began by reading a story of their choice and then asked them to read or tell me about one of their favorite books. Each child took the interview very seriously, thoughtfully pausing to think about certain questions and philosophically reflecting on others. Toby, perhaps, summed up our interactions best when he told me at the outset, "I know what an interview is—it's when somebody tells someone more about things than the other person knows." He was right. The children were my *reading specialists*.

On Being a Reader

Sasha and Toby were fluent readers in the conventional sense; Liz and Laura stood poised on the brink—identifying a selection of words and memorizing long texts. Yet all four children considered themselves *readers*. When I asked them to read me their favorite books—they all chose stories that they could either *read* or *tell*, stories imbued with humor, narrative power, and personal meaning. For Toby and Sasha there is a reflective awareness of what the world was like before and after reading.

Sasha: Before I had my own kind of spelling and I read stories in my own homemade books—see what I think happened is I spelt the same way I sounded out.
Val: So you'd think in your head how it sounded.
Sasha: uh-uh.
Val: Is that the beginning of learning to read?
Sasha: Well, see, when I was writing like this I was learning to read and I was spelling my own way and I would only read the words in the way *I* made them—not the way *books* did.
Val: How did you change from spelling your way to the book way?
Sasha: Oh, when I started getting used to *Ant and Bee* and reading *Frog and Toad* . . . then later, see, when I saw book words *I would just break through and spell through the words*—like you know a few days I found out difficult (smiles delightedly) which is a very difficult word! Right?

Toby, in recollecting his own experience, as we read *The Wild Baby*, tells me:

I can always figure out words one way or another—I can sound it out or I can just figure it out—before I couldn't . . . See I remember 'cos I know the sounds of all these words now (points to book).
Val: But how do you figure out a new word?
Toby: I sound it out, and I hear myself, like if I was deaf. . . like if I need a hearing aid—and I tell myself and then it sounds in my head.

Liz "reads" me several books during our interview. She has *Angelina Ballerina* virtually memorized and as I watch her read the text, I notice that she draws clues from the pictures as well as key phrases such as "too busy doing curtsies on the bed" or "people came from far and wide." When I later ask her if she can pick out words like "people" and "curtsies," she does so but has trouble identifying simple words like "on," "the," and "bed." Her clues come from the context of meaning as well as the engaging sound of certain phrases that are funny and out of the ordinary. Similarly, in a Sesame Street book, Liz picks out "Sesame" and "Street" and "Bird" but has trouble identifying "Big." Her clues are derived from the enjoyment of text and an astute memory for interesting words.

Val: How do you know how to read that story, Liz?
Liz: Well, I read this book a lot of times and also I see the picture in my head, and how it sounds in my ears—and also *'cos it's my favorite book*. I always know the words in my *favorite* books.

Liz's attraction to humor in story is borne out in another conversation when she asks me to read *Big Foot* to her. Every few pages of text, Big Foot makes the sound "Kerplop, Kerplop." Each time I read that, Liz laughs and tries to find the words on the page with her finger and correctly identifies them each time.

I notice a similar process occurring with Laura who tells me, "I got to read by listening to stories and also by writing words," and she proceeds to draw up a list of rhyming "et" words—"net, vet (that's an animal doctor), set, bet—see I can read them 'cos I made them."

Later, when Laura and I are reading stories, Laura fetches a book about *Grandma and Daisies* saying, "I think I know part of this one." She proceeds to read the text, remembering key phrases like: "Mary calls them common old weeds." When I ask her to find "Mary," "weeds," and "common," she correctly identifies them, but like Liz, has difficulty identifying simple words like "on" and "to."

Val: Laura, how do you know how to read these words like daisy and weeds?
Laura: Well, see, I just know, 'cos *I like that book and it's in my brain.*
Val: But how does your brain tell you how to know hard words like that?
Laura: I look at the first letter and the last letter and then I know what the word is.
Val: How about the middle of the word?
Laura: No, I don't really bother about that!

As both Laura and Liz classify themselves as readers, I took their assumptions seriously. In reality, they were *readers*, of texts that they liked and enjoyed. They *could read* the story to me, to themselves, to others, with vivid expression and full dramatic power. They could *live* the meaning of the story, or as Benjamin writes, they were sinking the thing into the life of the storyteller. Liz thought for a long time when I asked her when she began to read, and she replied

"I learnt a long time ago, at somebody's house and the somebody is my grandma—now I know how to read, but I used to not know—and now I know it feels different inside (pause) and now I also know how to tie a bow."—We discuss bow tying and she continues—"reading stories makes me kind of happy and sad!"

Empowerment and the Storied Lived World

Being the teller and reader is an empowering act for these children. They are engaging with the text and, at the same time, transforming it and themselves in the telling. Themes of "feeling powerful," "confidence," "being happy or sad," feeling an attraction to certain words and their representative lived situations give a sense of empowerment. As Toby remarked, "now I can be the reader and someone else is the listener!" Feeling in charge of the text, turning the pages when *you* decide, showing the pictures, being the first to tell of a situation all feature as important components of being the *reader-teller* of texts. Clearly these children's experiences of literacy have a long history—a storied history, where in their home bedtime stories have been a consistent ritual. At day care, storytime has been a daily experience for several years. They have led storied lives, experienced creating and transforming meaning into worlds that transcend the dailyness of their everyday lives. Hence reading has long been part of their experience, tied to engagement and involvement with narrative, myth, and fable. Now, *reading* the text involves a transformation from being a listener to an actor—to an agent of another's storyness. "It's different now, because I don't have to pay attention to someone else reading it—I just pay attention to listening to myself and I get to be the chooser of the stories too," remarked Sasha.

The stories that the children choose to read are stories that are humorous, or dramatic "scarey" narratives with complex plots, as well as those that speak to their lived realities. Liz, for example, told me *Angelina Ballerina* was one of her favorites—and I suspect that part of her attraction to the story lies in her identification with ballet, as she herself takes ballet lessons and frequently prances around her home in a leotard and tights. None of these themes described is different from the adult experience of text-engagement and should not surprise us. However, what does give cause for surprise is the violation of these lived story experiences when children confront behavioral skill-oriented textbooks in their classrooms. Consider one of the kindergarten reading series, *Funny Little Ant.* The instructions to the teacher suggest bringing in some ants, showing flashcards with clue pictures and "never have the child guess what the word is as a first impression can be a lasting one!" The clue vocabulary is given at the beginning of the book.

The text reads:

Little ant
Big ant
Walk, little ant, walk
Little ant hill
Big ant hill
Walk to little ant hill
Walk to big ant hill
Funny little ant
Funny big ant

If we examine this text as an example, we see how reading is reduced to word recognition separated from story engagement. The words are simple and the assumption is that giving a clue vocabulary with pictures will stimulate visual association. Yet all four children that I spoke to stress the importance of complexity which was tied to *liking* their *stories*. In fact, Liz and Laura were learning to read by identifying difficult and unusual sounding words using clues that related to meaning, not visual stimuli. They enjoyed the challenge of complexity. It is interesting to listen to the critique that Liz and Sasha have of the other reading curriculum texts which are modeled on similar assumptions of simplicity.

Liz: The stories are too boring . . . they're so dumb and boring . . . and I hate those dopey books and the worksheets. . . . We have to sit there and do this and do that and worksheets all the time.
Val: What do you think kids could tell the people who write those books?
Liz: Tell the teachers not to get those books anymore.
Val: What books should the teachers get?
Liz: Get the books that are more interesting so kids will like to read the stories.

Sasha has similar criticisms and compares these books unfavorably to an engaging British story series, *Ant and Bee*, that he learned to read with:

Val: Sasha, if you were the boss of the class, what would you change?
Sasha: I'd get the *Ant and Bee* books—'cos the story is fun and the kid reads the red words and the big person reads the black words and you *both* read the story *together*. And it has much more pages. In kindergarten the books are dumb and there are little papers with the words on and you have to write them and it's so boring—I sit there and try and make up my own story out of the words so it's more interesting. (He pauses) You know what—I think it's boring to read too early—you know why?
Val: Why?
Sasha: Because then when the other kids are learning when they're five and you already know how to read, you have to wait and wait for everything that the teacher's trying to teach.
Val: What is the teacher trying to teach?
Sasha: To teach the kids to read—but I could do it better and so could other kids who know how to read. They should let the kids teach other kids.
Val: Do you think the kids need to be taught or will they learn it anyway?
Sasha: Well, you need help to know the sounds of letters and to have stories read to you so you remember—*but then it just happens inside of you and suddenly you just know how to read.*

The De-Meaning of Reading

Reading curriculum specialists assume that breaking reading down into a set of skills, involving word recognition, word analysis, decoding, and comprehension mirrors the process of the child's development as a reader. But these children are telling us that complexity, narrative, and text-engagement are the characteristics that shape their development as readers and which speak to their history of storyness. In some ways, the de-meaning of reading for children speaks to a larger issue, which Paulo Freire (1970) has articulated in his radical pedagogy of literacy when he writes:

> acquiring literacy does not involve memorizing sentences, words, or syllables—lifeless objects disconnected to an existential universe—but rather is an act of creation and recreation, a self-transformation producing a state of intervention in one's context. (p. 48)

When we consider Freire's work begun in the late '50s in Brazil and continued beyond his exile after the 1964 coup d'état, several characteristics of Freire's pedagogy become clear: His starting point is always the existential landscape of the people, who become co-learners together with him in the reconstruction of a reality to which their literacy can be put to practical and transformative use. By asking the peasants to describe and create concrete images of their lived worlds in artistic form, a renaming of reality begins, which leads to the formation of *generative words*, grounded in the people's reality; hence literacy becomes a process of empowerment. As Freire has always been quick to point out, the peasants were not illiterate, rather they were dealphabetized, marginalized from their society, residing in a culture of silence. Alphabetization, Freire argued, must be connected to a liberatory literacy, a sociopolitical and cultural transformative act for "to speak a true word is to transform the world" (1970, p. 75). Naming the world is also reading the world, and while alphabetization skills are a necessary component for transformative action, they are also mere means to a greater end.

For a child, then, who literally begins life naming the world into which she is born, reading the world is but a continuation of that transformative action. Alphabetization or the acquisition of such skills are clearly secondary to the intentional meaning-making that the reading of a storied world involves.

Atmosphere and Mood

The storied experiences that many young children share, exemplified by these four children, have a quality, an essential atmosphere that is frequently tied to intimacy, warmth, and private time spent alone with an adult. I found it interesting that, during our

interviews, the children attempted to recreate a space and time that was ours. We sat together *alone*, in their private places. On two different occasions when the telephone rang, Toby and Liz answered the phone and abruptly informed the respective callers that they were doing something special and could not talk. The images that the children have of storytimes are warm and engaging, memories of laps, of cuddling, of exclusive adult attention.

The mood of evocation that surrounds story—of smells, of touch of sounds, of vivid images—is abruptly compressed as the atmosphere of "storyness" is replaced by the atomism of words—words lost to the de-meaning landscape of objectives, outcomes, and grade level assessment. As Ien Dienske (1984) points out, we live our entire lives in both a private and social atmosphere. With the young child, this atmosphere is experienced in moving circles of meaning as story experiences are appropriated and transformed and become part of the lifeworld. How does this fundamental mood change when institutional reading begins?

Lived Literacy

Letters, which previously held the status of mysterious and intriguing identities, in school become flat undimensional characters. Consider this early observation of my child as illustrative.

> At four years old, I observed Sasha experimenting with letters and numbers, frequently blending the two systems together. The multiple possiblities that he saw in letters extended across many dimensions of his perceptual world. When writing K for Kimberley (the name of a friend at day care), Sasha turned K into X and said, "Now I have a railroad track crossing"—and followed that with a drawing of a train.

The sign, for a child, is also a signifier of a concrete set of images where letters and numbers can graphically represent everyday objects. Do we as adults see the multiple possibilities in the letter K? In mastering literacy, we believe that letters must copy a unidimensional plane, such as the graphic. But for a child, numbers and letters are open systems capable of transformation. Letters and numbers dance and sing on Sesame Street, why not elsewhere? Indeed, letters have a life of their own. Consider Elizabeth Bishop's (1984) memory of her own experience with numbers and letters as she reconstructs her childhood in Primer Class in Nova Scotia.

> At first I could not get past the letter g, which for some time I felt was far enough to go. My alphabet made a satisfying short song, and I didn't want to spoil it. . . . It was wonderful to see that the letters each had different expressions, and that the same letter had different expressions at different times. Sometimes the two capitals of my name looked miserable, slumped down and sulky, but at others they turned fat and cheerful, almost with roses in their cheeks. (pp. 4,12)

Elizabeth Bishop, at five years old, created a storied world for her letters in much the same way that young children, experimenting with form, shape, and meaning, give life to theirs.

Yet these critical moments of experimentation, of thoughtfulness, of engaging with living letters and living stories, are frequently denied to children in a formalized reading curriculum. Unfortunately, this erosion of lived literacy has its prologue in many child care centers in North America, where the bureaucratization of experience extends not only to schooling, but to two- and three-year-olds drilled in so-called reading readiness. Consider one typical example drawn from my notes of my field observations at a franchised child care center in Michigan.

> During storytime for the three-year-old day care children the teacher showed the children a picture with a coffee-pot adjacent to a drum and asked "Is the coffee pot a drum?" No-one answered. The teacher replied: "No, is this (pointing to drum) a drum? Yes, Why? Because he pounds on it. Is a house a park bench? No. Why? Because you can't sit on it!"

The above lesson continued where the teacher both asked and answered her own absurd questions. The lesson apparently was designed to teach children discrimination skills in matching object and function. For the fidgeting and inattentive children, storytime was clearly anathema to story.

The Child as Intentional Meaning-Maker

Beekman (1983) describes how, from a phenomenological perspective, the young child is an active intentional builder of meaning, a serious partner in dialogue with others, and so participates in creating a social world. Storytelling places this lived world in narrative time, and embeds the child as a literary actor—a listener and transformer of meaning. As Maxine Greene (1978) writes, it *is* the engagement with art and literature that empowers us to move beyond ourselves, enabling us to *read* the world and stirring us to wide-awakeness. By depriving the child of these encounters, by de-meaning and de-storying reading, do we not vitiate the child's existential experience of literacy?

When we observe the way in which young children can creatively transform the texts that they engage with, we realize that Sartre was right when he remarked that to read a book is to write it (de Beauvoir, 1985). Young children also create their own texts as a prelude to becoming actual readers. Toby showed me several books that he had made together with his mother out of his "own stories." Sasha frequently referred to his own "homemade stories" and "homemade books." Liz and Laura told me how they knew how to

read the words that they made. This appropriation of words and the acts of transformation by the children are themes that echo in Michael Armstrong's (1980) ethnographic observations of his primary school classroom as he describes the literary world of young children.

Freire, in reconstructing his own childhood memories, writes:

> "Deciphering the world flowed naturally from *reading* my particular world; it was not something superimposed on it. I learned to read and write on the ground of the backyard in my house, in the shade of the mango trees, with words from my world rather than the wider world of my parents. The earth was my blackboard, sticks my chalk." As he later described his experience with his teacher he fondly recollects: "reading the word, the phrase, the sentence, never entailed a break with reading the world—with her, reading the word meant reading the word-world." (1983, pp. 7,8)

Lived Literacy and Institutional Literacy

For Sasha, Toby, Liz, and Laura, reading *is* a "word-world" experience, integrally tied to the storyness of their lives. They engage with narrative, they laugh at the *Wild Baby,* and turn wide-eyed with fear when the Wicked Witch of the West appears. In short, *they live their stories.* At this point in their young lives, reading still remains a storied experience to be distinguished from "dopey readers" and "dumb workbooks." For now, they stand outside of institutional literacy—partly because of their home experience where stories feature prominently and, also because they attend an unusually open and flexible kindergarten and child care center. But what of their child brothers and sisters in other families, in other schools, in other child care settings? How long can lived literacy be maintained in the face of the institutionalization of the word—dominated by Houghton-Mifflin, Holt Rinehart & Winston, and others of the corporate world? For it is in the bureaucratization of experience, the fragmentation of engagement with text, the coercive breakdown of lived literacy, that the child suffers the loss of the word-world and the transformative possibilities of meaning-making.

Perhaps Lewis Carroll foresaw this all long ago:

> "The question is," said Alice, "whether you can make words mean so many different things." "The question is," said Humpty-Dumpty, "which is to be master, that's all." (Carroll, 1959, p. 269)

Note

1. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the American Education Research Association annual conference, Chicago, April 1985. A shorter version was published in *Thinking*, 2(1).

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