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ABSTRACT

Using the concept of the "constructed child" to reflect on "the child writer," this paper addresses the ways in which educators make sense of what the child does when he or she writes in school. The paper draws upon experiences with 5- to 10-year-old children in a recent study of child writers, especially 8-year-old Ayesha. It pays careful attention to the children educators know in order to reconstruct the image of the child. The paper considers the dominant ways in which educators have constructed the child writer, and illustrates one way of reconceiving that child. The paper suggests that rethinking dominant images might help educators better meet the curricular challenges of the current time--among those challenges is the need to envision the child in ways that construct hope for and belief in the diversity of children. Contains 53 references. (RS)

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Confronting the Split between "The Child" and Children: Toward New Curricular Visions of the Child Writer

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My experience of actually working with children has made me aware of the split that exists between children and "the child." Both history and many psychologies tell us, in very different ways, that "the child" is a construct ... There is no "real," or "natural," or transcendental child. At the same time children are there, in life as we know it, ... in networks of social and political relationships. And so we will continue ... constructing hope, and belief and desire and political futures, using the figure of "the child."

—Carolyn Steedman, *Past Tenses* (1992, p. 194)

As educators we regularly confront this split between children—living with us in all their complexity in real social and historical time—and the child we construct as we participate in the professional dialogue of the time. We use our understandings of "the nature of the child" (a familiar book title, heading, and topic) to help us appreciate the complexity of the children we see everyday. In our reflections about our children, we refer to the normative child, sometimes specifying the place of the child in the organizational and curricular structure of the school, as in "the preschooler," "the kindergartner," "the middle schooler," and, most relevant for this article, "the child writer."

Over historical time, as the intertwined cultural, political, and intellectual milieu changes, so does our way of constructing or seeing the child. And, of course, children themselves play a role in the construction and deconstruction of our notions of childhood, as they, in their own space and time, surprise us, puzzle us, challenge us to rethink. One contribution of poststructuralist thought is this emphasis on the instability of meanings, on the ways in which our understandings of ourselves and others are

constructed and reconstructed in the material conditions of a particular historical time (Foucault, 1981).

In this essay, I aim to use this concept of the constructed child to reflect on "the child writer," that is, on the ways in which we make sense of what the child does when he or she writes in school (already "the child" is deconstructing under the linguistic, social, and political pressure of having to use "she" and/or "he"). This is an admittedly unwieldy topic, and this article will be but an entry into an ongoing conversation: on the one hand, some voices suggest that the "groundbreaking" work in writing was done in the seventies and eighties (e.g., Moore & Moore, 1990), that we, in effect, know about the child writer; on the other hand, some stress our lack of understanding, pointing to the myth of the child writer, who lives without a gender, race, class, or any other significant collective relationship, other, perhaps, than age (e.g., Delpit, 1988; Gilbert, 1989).

Ground *was* broken, and our construction of the child writer was inevitable, as Carolyn Steedman's quote suggests. But the milieu has changed now, almost 20 years after the surge of interest began. In the sections to follow, I consider dominant ways in which we have constructed the child writer, and I also illustrate one way of reconceiving that child; in the process, I suggest that rethinking dominant images might help us better meet the curricular challenges of the current time; among those challenges is the need to envision the child in ways that construct hope for and belief in the diversity of children with whom we work.

In this effort, I will draw upon my experiences with 5- to 10-year-old children in a recent study of child writers (Dyson, 1993a), especially 8-year-old Ayesha. It will take careful attention to the children we know to reconstruct our image of the child. This article, then, will not be the removed discussion of the cultural critic, deconstructing a word like *child* (as interesting a task as that might be). This will be a discussion by an educator whose imagination, like that of many others, has been shaped by everyday school experiences with children.

The Child Writer

Many of our now familiar concepts and vocabulary for imagining the child writer were, 20 years ago, reflective of new trends in scholarship.

Influenced especially by those who painstakingly analyzed young children's rule systems for such abstract phenomena as syntax (Brown, 1973) and orthography (Read, 1971), we saw the young child as a meaning maker, as capable of figuring out mind-boggling rule systems with comparative ease. It was the nature of the child to use such symbol systems. Moreover, child language research also made visible the responsive mother, who attended to her child's communication, adding or extending information (e.g., Cross, 1978). Both child and mother were constructed primarily from studies of middle class speakers of Standard English, who were European-American in culture.

Research on child language was part of a broader interest in the processes of human problem-solving (Gardner, 1985); this "cognitive revolution" avoided the messiness of culture, history, and politics and yet embraced symbols, including language (which, some would say, is the embodiment of history, politics, and culture [Geertz, 1973]). This interest in cognitive processes generated at least some of the theoretical backdrop for the studies of writing processes. The elementary language arts literature, influenced especially by the groundbreaking work of Graves (1975) and his colleagues, foregrounded the active, problem-solving child, intent on making meaning or "sense."

Moreover, this active child was embedded in certain curricular practices, in which teacher and child played particular roles and enacted varied values (Cherryholmes, 1988). The heart of these practices was the writing conference. Like the responsive mother, the teacher (and, with teacher guidance, peers) was to be a responsive audience, paying attention to what the child said, helping that child identify her or his problems in crafting and communicating ideas, and helping solve those problems (Calkins, 1986; Graves, 1983). Indeed, "the same principles underlying a child's acquisition of language and behavior from its mother were occurring in teacher-child interactions during conferences" (Graves, 1983, p. 271).

During the eighties this vision of the child, linked to that of the teacher/mother, was solidified, helped by an interpretation of Vygotskian theory that stressed, not the sociocultural situatedness of language, but the facilitating expert, scaffolding the learner (e.g., Sowers, 1985). Thus, the identity of the teacher as mother melded with that of the teacher as expert writer, helping the child language user flesh out inexplicit meanings and

develop coherent, sensible contributions. The desired instructional and developmental outcome was clear—a “real” child author who, like a “real” adult one, could manipulate information in clear and interesting ways (Graves, 1983).

The Child/A Child: Ayesha

Against the backdrop of the active child writer, and the helpful other, imagine 8-year-old Ayesha:

Ayesha is very eager to share with her class the piece she has just written. She is smiling one of those smiles that suggest barely contained energy. Finally, it is her turn to share. She reads her piece, which includes a long list of well-liked rappers. As she reads each name, an enthusiastic “YES!” goes up from a large contingent of the third grade—and Ayesha’s smile bursts periodically into a giggle.

Given current ways of imagining the child writer, we might assume here that Ayesha’s purpose is to communicate information. And we might assume as well that the role of teacher and peers is to serve as “audience”; audience members respond to her text content in some kind of authentic way, and then, by routine or by author choice, they may offer comments and ask questions that might help Ayesha extend herself as a writer.

Using evaluation scales for judging her efforts, we might also say that Ayesha has not written a particularly “good” piece. There are “gaps in information,” and very few “coherent statements on the same topic” (Graves, 1983, p. 259). Still, we might also take comfort from the fact that the child writes better some times rather than others, that the child’s efforts go “up” or “down” a vertical developmental scale. Ayesha obviously cares very much for her topic, so we might hope—or even suggest—that she consider expanding her piece, making the meaning behind the “YES!’s” more explicit.

And yet, are we so sure that this is a sensible response here? What is Ayesha trying to do as she stands in front of her peers? Does she need help from anyone? With what exactly? How do we know if she is successful or not, if we don’t know what she’s trying to do?

To ask such questions is to particularize “the child”—to begin to make visible Ayesha’s identity—and to confront the split between “the child,”

constructed within the frames of our official classroom practices, and the children living in Steedman's "networks of social and political relationships." Moreover, to answer such questions requires moving beyond the boundaries of familiar practices and entering the complex relational seas of Ayesha's worlds. To prepare for this journey, I elaborate below on the split between "the child" and children, with help from "a fish."

Constructing and Reconstructing Identities: The Child, Children, and A Fish

A Fish

There is an old saying about a fish—that it would be the last to discover water because, outside that water, a fish has no existence, no self; the water provides the resources for its everyday life and, also, the constraints of that life. Moreover, its sense of self (if such sense were possible), of being a fish of a particular size, speed, color, or other quality, would depend upon its relationship to other fish in its sea and on the historical, cultural, and political milieu that marked certain qualities as significant.

Thus, this hypothetical fish (one that might find itself in a Leo Lionni story) knows itself only in its interaction with other fish in the taken-for-granted waters of its everyday life—and in the fish stories it tells and is told about the significance of its existence. Moreover, the fish's sense of self is not a static thing, but always in motion, as it swims in varied circumstances where varied qualities are marked as critical to success as a fish. Further, if that poor fish were plucked from its sea and put in a tank, it would be difficult for anyone to really know the fish; indeed, the fish would hardly know itself, removed, as it were, from its social place. All of this is to say that identity is a social construction; the self is known only in relations with others, or so argue the cultural theorists and social philosophers (e.g., Bakhtin, 1981; Foucault, 1981; McRobbie, 1992).

Thus, like the hypothetical fish, we as human beings know ourselves through our relationships with others in the course of everyday experiences. It is hard to see the taken-for-granted practices, values, and beliefs that energize that daily world—and, indeed, organize our very sense of self. As with the hypothetical fish, that sense of self is linked in dynamic ways to that of others who are "marked" in similar ways by experience and history. In our

time, the significant (and overlapping) markers for human beings include, among others, age, class, culture, race, gender, education, and religion. Moreover, it is difficult for us to know others who swim in very different social, cultural, and political waters, so to speak.

The Children and the Child

In school, children—like the hypothetical fish—swim in the waters of their relationships to others, just as do teachers. Moreover, not only do teachers and children have relationships with each other, they have relationships with varied colleagues and friends. Teachers, though, are responsible for crossing the relational waters. Indeed, as suggested above, they are encouraged to model themselves after the good mother and, to at least some extent, come to know and respond to their students as they would their own children (Steedman, 1992).

And it is here, with this responding to children as a good mother, that we find Steedman's constructed child, the good child, a figure of hope and belief bred in the intellectual and political milieu of the seventies. This child is cut off from a complex social sea and seen only in relationship to the good mother. Moreover, this child will blossom only if inherent capacity is not "squander[ed]" by parents who are not good, whatever their social class (Harste, Woodward, & Burke, 1983, p. 45). (Indeed, poor parents needing training are often described as literally poor [Lavatelli, 1971; for a critique of the legacy of these ideas, see Polakow, 1993]). The image of the meaning-making child, solving the intellectual puzzle of literacy, is thus complemented by the meaning-responsive parent/teacher (Snow, 1983; Wells, 1981): The good child is made in the image of the good mother.

This constructed image of the meaning-making child, assisted by a responsive mother, is a problematic one. For the real children in our classrooms exist in very different relational waters than does the uncomplicated child of professional reference, whose identity as an apprentice author is fixed. Children do learn from interaction with others, but that interaction is nested within culturally meaningful activities, themselves enacted by a shifting cast of characters: "children are involved with multiple companions and caregivers in organized, flexible webs of relationships that focus on shared cultural activities, not exclusively on the needs of solitary individuals" (Rogoff, 1990, p. 97).

And yet, the image of the good child, rooted in the idealized mother/child relationship, is embedded in taken-for-granted teaching practices and the categories and labels they involve (e.g., "conference," "response," "audience," "sense"). Moreover, these practices have become the frames by which educators assess and study child writing. Guided by assumptions about the child writer, we may frame individual children, not with the relations that matter to them, but with the relations that matter to us. Viewed in such a way, children may seem—and feel—adrift, unfocused, "at risk."

One way of becoming aware of our pedagogical frames is to view children as interactive participants in other frames, in other sets of significant relationships. For example, a major contribution of research on cultural differences has been to illustrate that behavior judged puzzling or inadequate inside official school frames (e.g., a child's silence, way of telling a story, or responding to a question) might seem sensible when viewed from the perspective of community interpretive norms (e.g., Heath, 1983; Philips, 1983). In this approach, though, the discovery of difference does not necessarily transform the normative assumptions of the school.

From the perspective of this article, the challenge is not simply to delineate differences between "the child" and those considered different. Rather, the challenge is to reconstruct the vision of "the child" that informs our professional work. Taking the lead from that old fish (and helped by a poststructuralist perspective on "self"), in the next section I illustrate how the child might be allowed a more complex identity, one forged through relationships with diverse others in the course of everyday life. And to help me in this effort, I return to Ayesha.

Observing in the Children's Waters

In the two-year project in which I met Ayesha, I aimed to understand learning to write from within the complex relational waters of the children's worlds, and I hoped too to contribute new ways of imagining "the child writer." I followed Ayesha, five other focal children, and each child's circle of friends as they interacted in the complex social worlds of their urban K-3 school. The school, located in the south central part of its densely populated city, served mainly two neighborhoods: 52% of the children come from a low income and working class African-American neighborhood and the others

from an integrated but primarily European-American working and middle class neighborhood; about 27% of the children were Anglo and then there were small percentages of children from many different heritages.

Ayesha and the other focal children, all African American, negotiated complex identities in their everyday experiences at school. The children were students in official classroom worlds, but they were also peers in unofficial (student-governed) worlds, tied by markers of age and status in the authority structure of the institution; moreover, the children had classmates who were also neighbors, tied by race, community culture, and a myriad of daily experiences, from grocery store trips to playing video games at local fast food places. While not highlighted, other kinds of social worlds, revolving around other kinds of important markers (e.g., gender, religion), also became relevant at one point or another as the children interacted with peers and teachers.

Although I was especially interested in the children's daily "writing workshop," I observed them in many different contexts throughout the school day, including lunch time and recess. Using the observational traditions of child study (Almy & Genishi, 1979) and the analytic tools of sociolinguistics (Gumperz & Hymes, 1986; Goodwin, 1990), I aimed to understand how child writers used varied kinds of textual and cultural material (e.g., pop songs and picture books, raps and science reports) to negotiate their relationships with diverse others. I identified the kinds of social goals or work that guided the children's composing, the relationships to others ("the audience") that work entailed, the kind of textual "sense" desired, and the anticipated response. (For methodological details, see Dyson, 1993a.) While any one composing act might be informed by multiple goals, creating a typology of kinds of "social work" was a helpful tool for making sense of the children's varied ways of writing. Below I illustrate varied kinds of social work, relying particularly on Ayesha.

A Child Composing a Self in Multiple Social Worlds

Ayesha was a fast-acting child—she often literally put her hand over her mouth, having found herself saying the wrong thing, given the social waters she was in. Once she laughingly called out to her teacher in the midst of a peer giggling session over a rather scatological pun; she was calling others over to join in the joke and caught herself beckoning her teacher. "Never mind," she quickly said. Like all of the children, Ayesha could not be

described simply—nor could her writing. It contracted and expanded, was made rhythmic and atonal, metaphoric or straightforward depending upon purpose and circumstance.

During composing time, one dominant goal for all the children, including Ayesha, was *to establish social cohesion*. To do so with peers, the children often drew on material from popular culture—stories about superheroes, verses by rap stars, or scenes from horror movies. Such material was apt to elicit an “Oh yeah, I saw that too” from a child addressee, or a “Me too, I like that too.” It was this desire to affiliate with others that seemed to energize Ayesha’s rapper event.

Ayesha had begun the piece after a fairly long talk or “conference” with her teacher, Louise, who helped her decide what to write. The topic of Ayesha’s sister, Twilight, had arisen, which would be, Ayesha thought, an OK topic—as long as she did not reveal any of her sister’s “personal business.” So Ayesha sat thinking about Twilight, which led to thoughts about her sister’s love of rappers, which led to writing down rappers’ names, which led to a large group of children gathered around Ayesha’s desk happily discussing favorite performers (especially those who were on the Grammy Awards television show the night before). A sample of her text follows:

Twilight is my sister. She like to dance ... Her best is
rappers. She like B.B.D. M.C. Hammer Bobby Brown Young M.C.
Johnny Gill Teven Kamel ...

Thus, by writing the names of rappers, Ayesha affiliated with others who found pleasure in the ways she (and her sister) did. Indeed, she was most eager to share her piece during the daily rug meeting precisely because she anticipated the enthusiastic response of her friends, who had, after all, helped her write her piece. Ayesha had no interest in revising the piece after its presentation, nor did any child venture forward with a helpful suggestion. Why would she—or they? The piece had accomplished its work.

Ayesha’s peer Crystal sometimes wrote stories specifically to set some kinds of peer affiliations against others, that is, *to engage in social manipulation or regulation* on a rather grand scale. “Forgetting” the official rule about checking with others before writing about them, she wrote one illustrative piece designating certain children (including Ayesha) as “sisters

and friends," others as their "boyfriends," and still others as "wimps." This was not a piece to be revised after a public reading; indeed, it would lose its value after its first such reading, when the element of surprise would be gone. "Just having fun" was Crystal's view of such texts (a view not shared by the "wimps"). While Ayesha herself did not write such pieces, she did thoroughly enjoy the scenes that followed Crystal's rug-time presentations. And like Crystal, Ayesha exploited official composing opportunities to do unofficial social work, that is, to manage her relationships with peers.

On other occasions, Ayesha wrote specifically to raise herself above the crowd. She wrote *to engage in artful performances*, through which she hoped to gain others' attention and respect. In doing so, she, like all of the children, often drew on oral folk resources (i.e., the features of verbal art, which highlight the musical and image-creating properties of language [Smitherman, 1986; Tannen, 1989]). The aim was not a confirming "me too" but a pleased and, maybe, surprised "Oh!" or even laughter. Writing for this purpose helped Ayesha participate successfully in official and unofficial spheres; like her teacher Louise, she was interested in careful crafting (but not necessarily in explicitness of information).

As a performer, Ayesha often worked hard to write rhythmic verses. She would say and resay lines, revising in process as she tried to make them rhyme and, also, make sense. She did not collaborate with others on these pieces but looked forward to the applause of her peers. During the latter part of the school year, she wrote several such pieces about African-American heroes. Unlike some of her humorous verses, these pieces were serious, as was the topic; following is one of her favorite poems:

Martin Luther King was a preacher.
He really knew how to talk.
In August he led a peace march.
He walked and walked and walked.
One day they threw a bomb at his house.
It was bigger than a mouse.
The KKK was very bad.
They made the people very mad, and also made them sad.
He was a serious man,
and taught peace on the land.

While it was not her dominant social goal, Ayesha also wrote *to communicate information* she thought others did not know. She hoped for response was appreciation and maybe even gratitude (“That’s interesting. Thanks.”). This social purpose was also one that could potentially allow success in official and unofficial worlds. When Ayesha wrote to teach others, her writing was more detailed—not simply because she was moving up and down a vertical trajectory of writing development, but because she had different goals. Consider, for example, the following informational piece on Martin Luther King:

Martin Luther King Jr. was born on January 15, 1929. He was a man that lived and had his dream. He believe in peace and justice and he believed that people should be equal and that whites and blacks should be friends. He preached, he preached a speech. In 1964 he led a peace march through the southern states. He was killed in 1968 on April 15 by James Earl Ray.

To produce such a piece, Ayesha needed access to information and help in deciding what information should be included—but she did not take help from her anticipated audience; she sought help from her mother and, also, from books she had read.

How does Ayesha, as she negotiates among the complex social worlds of her classroom, help us reconfigure our assumptions about the child writer? Where does she fit those assumptions? Where does she challenge them? In the following section I again reflect on Ayesha’s—and all the children’s—ways of writing as I work to re-imagine the child writer.

Reconceptualizing Writing, The Child, and The Child Writer

Basic to reconceptualizing the child writer is reconceptualizing writing itself. As Ayesha’s case suggests, we need a definition that goes beyond writing as a generic verb, a kind of linguistic and cognitive process children use, and beyond the constraints of a single relationship, beyond the gaze of the good mother. We need a definition that captures the fluidity of the medium in motion, the way in which writers reconfigure their relationships with others, just as Ayesha adopted roles as collaborator, performer, or teacher, positioned in complex ways amidst the social waters of her classroom.

Such a definition can be found, I think, in the work of the social and language philosopher Bakhtin (1981). In his view, composing oral or written words involves entering into a dialogue with another, using words to construct a social place where the self and the other are connected. Thus Ayesha, and all the observed children, negotiated varied kinds of relationships, and, to do so, they made use of different kinds of textual "sense" and anticipated different kinds of audience "response." Only sometimes did the children position themselves in expected ways. For example, the children only sometimes tried to craft information in explicit ways for others; and they only sometimes viewed those others as simultaneously "audience members" and potential "helpers."

A view of writing as a medium for negotiating relationships is compatible with a new vision of the developing child, different in significant ways from the one dominating the developmental literature 20 years ago. The child is still an active maker of meaning, but that meaning making involves "acquir[ing] a framework for interpreting experience ... learn[ing] how to negotiate meaning in a manner congruent with the requirements of the culture" (Bruner & Haste, 1986, p. 1). Both child invention and communication occur inside an interpretive frame, and it is that frame that determines appropriate action (e.g., that this is an occasion for performance, for appreciation, for teaching, for being helped).

Thus, the new child writer is a complex social and cultural being. The child learning to write is learning to manipulate symbols which themselves represent cultural meanings (i.e., words), and the manipulation itself must happen in culturally appropriate ways (Ferdman, 1991). Moreover, in school, the child writer is also learning that only some kinds of writing purposes and textual materials (e.g., kinds of genre, kinds of cultural traditions) are associated with official success, with official power, so to speak.

Viewing Ayesha through the frame of this richer conception of the child writer reveals her complex identity and the collective relationships important to her, among them, being an African American, a female, and a third grader. Sometimes one aspect of Ayesha's self conflicted with another, as when she refused to write a response to a book about George Washington, who, she said, was prejudiced. And sometimes the complex textures of her identity resonated deeply, as in her skillful poems about African-American heroes.

Despite—indeed because of—the collective aspects of her identity, Ayesha was *not* just a sum of reductive categories. Her essence as an individual was revealed in the rhythms of her ways of responding to others. And writing—the rendering of a relationship in a graphic medium—was therefore a means, not only for authoring a text, but for authoring a self, as Bakhtin suggests:

Self creates itself in crafting an architectonic relation between the unique locus of the activity which the individual human organism constitutes and the constantly changing natural and cultural environment which surrounds it. This is the meaning of Bakhtin's dictum that the self is an act of grace, a gift of the other. (Clarke & Holquist, 1981, p. 68)

The child as conceived in the pedagogical literature does not capture the complexity, the fluidity of such a self, nor does the implied teacher necessarily "see"—give back as a gift—the child's richness (Gilyard, 1991). It is the child as neutral information provider who is privileged. But that is but one kind of social work a child writer (or an adult writer) might engage in, and, then, only in situations in which the child sees such work as appropriate.

Reconceptualizing Curricular Goals and Practices

Reconceiving the child writer—indeed, writing itself—necessitates some curricular rethinking as well. With development, the child does not simply acquire strategies for producing more elaborate and complex texts (i.e., texts that are more interesting and clear); rather, the child comes to a fuller understanding of the complex societal functions of particular kinds of texts—the social work those texts can mediate. Thus, the overriding curricular goal for literacy education can not be the development of any one language style (e.g., language in which ideas are made explicit in tightly constructed prose). Rather, the most valuable goals would seem to be, not only flexibility in discourse use (Moffett, 1968), but also a practical understanding of the social dynamics, cultural meanings, and political complexities of writing.

Furthering such goals requires, first, stepping back from our intense focus on curricular practices like conferences and considering the interpretive frames governing those practices (i.e., assumptions about the purpose of writing, the role of the "other," the nature of sense). A conference designed to

help a child develop a text presumes that participants have a shared understanding of their general goals, of their respective roles, and, moreover, of values and beliefs about content and style (see related critique by Walker, 1992). But this may not be true. For example, a teacher's "whole group writing conference" might be a peer occasion for social cohesion or a child's show time stage, in both of which an explicitly helpful audience would be inappropriate (just as it is in our common culture).

To gain insight into children's interpretive frames, we have to attend to more than children's invented spelling, chosen topics, and composing processes. We must attend to the situational specifics of language use, to the basic questions of who, what, for whom, and why (for practical guidance on such observing, see Barr et al., 1988.). For, during open-ended composing times, children may be much more than apprentice composers—they may be collaborators, performers, audience members, teachers, and students, and they may take these roles as members of sometimes overlapping, sometimes colliding, social worlds. Moreover, children's diverse roles can be explicitly and officially acknowledged, as can their expectations for the social roles of audience members and helpers. Through talk about diverse ways of using and responding to writing, we as educators help children begin to reflect on—and gain more deliberate control over—the complex social and language worlds in which they live.

Second, a curricular goal of informed flexibility means that, not only must we acknowledge the children's relational waters, we must help children gain entry into the wider relational waters around them. And to do this, we must exploit children's sensitivity to social context, creating occasions when new kinds of purposes and audiences can be made socially sensible for and with children (Gray, 1987). As Applebee (1993) suggests, students may have difficulty with certain kinds of writing, not because they have to "catch up" on some vertical developmental path, but because they have to "catch on." Even adults' language, oral and written, will disintegrate syntactically and rhetorically if they lose their social bearing, as it were, their sense of their own role in the ongoing dialogue (Brodkey, 1989). In contrast, preschoolers and adolescents can add new ways with words to their repertoire with relative ease—if they understand the nature of the social situation and have ample interactive practice (e.g., Berko-Gleason, 1981; Gray, 1987; Wood, 1992).

To illustrate, Ayesha and her school mates seemed to find little social sense in writing "about what we did at the aquarium," "to summarize your story," or other writing about other official shared experiences. Such writing was often done with little evident involvement (e.g., little peer talk about the assignment). After all, to use the words of another case study child, Jameel, they were writing about "things you [a potential audience member] already know about because you was here," or there, as the case may be.

On the other hand, class-dictated lists, charts, and summaries of "what we have learned" (or want to learn) about rocks, for example, were consistently interesting to children, no doubt because their teachers made use of such class texts to accomplish varied kinds of important work—to jog memories, guide decisions, and settle disagreements during group discussions or projects. Through such joint efforts, children may learn how certain kinds of texts figure into the social world—how texts (even those about shared experiences) are talked about and consulted in varied activities, that is, how they support collegial exploration, collaborative construction, and helpful teaching. And, of course, children may "independently" but collegially (i.e., with mutual support) carry out the work of young geologists and oceanographers, mathematicians and reporters, using the textual tools of the trade, so to speak (e.g., Edelsky, Altwerger, & Flores, 1991).

Finally, the newly reconceived child is not only a social being, swimming amidst diverse relational waters, but also a cultural and political one. Classrooms composed of children from diverse backgrounds are distinguished by the diversity of potential frames of reference within which students relate to teacher and peers, among them race, ethnicity, class, language, and religion (O'Loughlin, 1992). *These differences in interpretive frames must become the basic stuff of our curricula* (Greene, 1988).

To illustrate the pedagogical importance of addressing such differences, I turn one last time to Ayesha's classroom. One day, Louise announced that the local newspaper was sponsoring a writing contest for children. The contest stories were to feature characters from "children's literature," who should face and then resolve a problem in a "peaceful" way. With great enthusiasm, Ayesha used characters from a verse she found in her friend Crystal's book on African American folklore (a monkey who drank wine and a goose who played the fiddle on a "sweet potato vine"). Ayesha wrote a slapstick tale of characters getting drunk on too much wine and causing a ruckus. When

Louise asked her to think about the kinds of book characters and situations the judges might be familiar with, Ayesha ended her story with Dumbo loudly batting his big ears to get everyone's attention and, thus, to settle them down. Perhaps it is my bias, but I expect the judges had in mind someone like Charlotte the Spider talking over a disagreement with Wilbur the Pig.

A teacher-student conference focused on Ayesha's crafting goals would not necessarily be helpful here. Ayesha was having no difficulty with sentence clarity, story structure, or grammar; moreover, she was drafting, revising, and editing. Indeed, Ayesha felt she was having no difficulty at all. Now a writing contest for young children did not seem to her teacher Louise (nor to me) like an occasion to be taken overly seriously. Louise, her classmates, and I all laughed and enjoyed Ayesha's piece a great deal. But it does seem important that gradually, deliberately, over the course of her schooling, Ayesha be supported as she faces societal expectations (or anticipated expectations) in varied situations. She must learn about those expectations, and she must learn also about making decisions (and accepting the consequences) of choosing to meet them or to challenge them. To focus on Ayesha as if her writing "problems" were hers alone, as if she needed only to communicate in authentic ways, helped by a responsive but acultural other, is no longer theoretically or pedagogically reasonable.

Addressing and exploiting similarities and differences in expectations—in interpretive frames—requires displaying and talking about them. In effect, we need classroom cultural forums (Bruner, 1986; Dyson, 1993b). In such forums, children can compare their own texts—and their responses to texts—about art forms (rappers and other poets), cultural heroes (Washington and King), imaginary figures (Charlotte and Dumbo), and social relations ("just playing" and insulting), among other possibilities—and we as educators can connect children's local issues with those of the wider world.

Reconstructing Ourselves through Reconstructing the Child

A central question implicit in this essay is, How, amidst the differences represented in any one classroom, do we as educators allow "the child" a place of integrity in the curricular landscape? How do we keep from reducing children to categories based on race, ethnicity, or gender or, worse, rendering great sweeps of children as "at risk" deviants from an imagined norm?

Denying differences will not help. Children do sometimes speak and write in different languages and dialects; they have different kinds of knowledge about different kinds of texts, prefer different art forms, different kinds of help and helpers.

To reconstruct integrity in the child, we must imagine that child as a socially skillful being, one remarkably attuned to interactional goals and social sense. And we must imagine that child too as a cultural being, rooted in families and communities, in networks of peers and friends. Our role as teachers is to help that child learn to negotiate skillfully—and, indeed, to contribute to the transformation of—the complex world we share.

And this negotiating and transforming is what we must do too as teachers. Critical reflection on our teaching perspectives and practices is a part of our ethical commitment to a society that is fair, just, and good (Abt-Perkins & Gomez, 1993; Edelsky, 1991; Greene, 1988). For those practices are the frames within which we see ourselves and others as sensible, or not, as successful, or not, as powerful, or not (Foucault, 1981). We cannot rid ourselves of frames; indeed, without orderly ways of making sense, we would go mad, just as surely as fish would die without water (Bateson, 1972). But by paying attention, we keep frames tentative, in motion; there is no point at which one says “and then the world was made good”; reflecting on and working toward the “good” is a continuing project (Taylor, 1989). In making the child deeper, richer, we are also expanding our own identity as teachers. For the constructed child is indeed made in our image. And there are many of us who have trouble seeing ourselves—and our mothers—in the child of the past twenty years; social circumstance and cultural frames guide our ways of living with and loving children. It may be time to talk less of “empowering” and more of recognizing the power that exists in a newly reconstructed child, one with social skill and cultural roots needing curricular space. Of course, this child too is a construct, one to be reconceived by educators of the future, as they respond to other historical and cultural conditions and, indeed, to other children swimming over the boundaries of the past.

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