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Young children's readings of wordless picture books: What's 'self' got to do with it?

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Abstract To understand difficulties in early literacy most research has focused on print related knowledge. Knowing about print, however, is only one aspect of reading and may neglect how successful early readers also develop capacities to enter the text world and make sense of it through a personal, relational experience. To explore this other aspect of early literacy I examined the wordless picture book readings of 18 children aged 5 and 6 prior to their ability to decode print. Analyses imply that the development of 'self that reads' might be described as a process of movement along a continuum over which a complex, flexible, dialogic self-system develops and which then influences the kind and amount of transactional relationship a reader has with a text. Acknowledging the importance of the developing 'self that reads' during childhood may deepen definitions of emergent literacy and broaden our approaches to young readers.

Keywords dialogism; early literacy development; reader text transaction; reading; self; wordless picture book

Understanding how young children become conventionally literate continues to be a compelling task for researchers and teachers alike. As many as one-third of all children experience difficulties with learning to read which then influence later academic performance (Whitehurst and Lonigan, 2002). In order to address this problem, literacy researchers have worked to identify antecedents of conventional reading, most of which reflect various aspects of children's print related knowledge (Senechal et al., 1998; Snow et al., 1998). For example, abilities such as understanding directionality and concept of word, as well as the attainment of phonemic awareness, are considered essential conditions for successful beginning reading (Clay, 2000; Elbro et al., 1998; Lomax and McGee, 1987). Knowledge of story structure and the written language register are also aspects of

print related knowledge that have been assessed and valued as important predecessors of conventional reading (Purcell-Gates, 1991, 1996; Sulzby, 1985, 1991). In fact, the concept of emergent literacy is traditionally thought of as referring solely to children's emerging knowledge about print (Purcell-Gates, 2001; Sulzby, 1985).

While gathering information about children's print related knowledge is important to the task of understanding literacy development in general, and difficulties in learning to read in particular, it is limited by a predominantly epistemological stance. That is, gathering information about children's print related knowledge assumes that what we need to know, if we are to grasp the nature of difficulties in early literacy, is what children *know about*. Yet knowing about print is only one aspect of reading. In successful reading the reader also demonstrates the capacity to enter into the text world and to make sense of text through a personal, relational experience (Rosenblatt, 1994). That is, reading and learning to read might be regarded as the development of *ways of being in relation with*, in addition to knowing about, text. In this article I posit that we need a better understanding of children's relationships with text as a way of being, or an event of self, in order to understand the complex activity of learning to read and the challenges that some children face in becoming readers. Thus I chose to study how children entered into the text world, prior to their ability to decode print, by observing and analyzing their 'readings' of wordless books.

Related literature

Emergent reading and picture books

Decades of research in storybook reading have helped to shape the field of emergent literacy in important ways. Indeed, analyses of children's early picture book readings have yielded fruitful insights into the nature of children's developing literacy. What I will do in this section is highlight those aspects of this research that have particular bearing on wordless book reading and the role of self.

First, children's emergent readings of picture books have been used as assessments of developing literacy; early readings of text that occur prior to the ability to read conventionally have been interpreted as manifestations of children's knowledge about a wide variety of literacy related concepts. Such understandings include knowledge of story structure, knowledge of the prosodic feature of stories, the nature of written language, and comprehension processes. For example, Sulzby's (1985) seminal work described the developmental nature of storybook reading on the basis of children's emergent readings of familiar picture books, and described a continuum of

growth with identifiable stages. Moreover, early and frequent storybook reading with adults is believed to facilitate children's development and the understandings that accompany it. In particular, readings in which adults invite children to participate in the reading are thought to be especially significant in facilitating children's early understandings about books (Martin and Reutzell, 1999; Zevenbergen and Whitehurst, 2003). Thus adult-child storybook readings, and the conversations that accompany them, have come to be viewed as a critical context for literacy development in general, as well as for children's independent emergent readings which then may serve as assessments of that development.

Beyond children's knowledge gains, researchers developed insights into the nature of the reading process as they observed children's emergent readings of storybooks. For example, Cochran Smith (1984) discusses the merger of the child's mental processes with the text as a marker of what the child does during storybook reading, thus bringing to light the constructive nature of making sense of text even at very early ages. Elster (1995; 1998) found that children often carried a piece of information from one text to another, forging connections between texts and making sense of one text in light of another. In particular, children often seemed to use their current story knowledge as a resource for making sense of new texts. In a similar vein, Paris and Paris (2003) have documented the nature of emergent comprehension, focusing on the storybook reading event as an assessment of the comprehending process as it occurs prior to conventional reading.

Relevant to this study are the notions that storybook reading is a constructive process, with developmental influences, and that it is facilitated by the dialogue between the adult and child. Indeed, I will argue later that a self-perspective allows us to see more clearly just how the construction of meaning may occur, and hence revalue the social nature of literacy learning and human development in general.

Self and reading

Exploring emergent literacy as a way of being, or an event of self, is supported by the notion of the reader text transaction, in which reading is conceptualized as being profoundly influenced not only by the nature of the text, but also by the nature of the reader. In her book *The Reader, the Text and the Poem*, Rosenblatt (1994) argues that reading is an intense personal experience in which the reader brings him/herself to the text in such a way that some aspect of self merges with some aspect of text, creating the 'poem'. This perspective on self and reading has been brought to bear in literacy studies, which document the notion that children's sense of

personal growth may be a consequence of this lived experience of reading (McGinley and Kamberelis, 1996; Wilhelm, 1997). Thus, the reader/text transaction is one example of how reading might be considered self-activity.

In addition, Ashton-Warner (1963) asserted that learning to read is an 'organic' event. Warner argued that children's experiences and their language representations of those experiences ('first words') could become their most accessible initial reading material. This accessibility, Warner suggested, was based on the fact that the reading material came from them in some organic way. One way to understand this organic nature is to consider first words and first stories as requiring children to represent their 'selves' in language and to become a first person character in the narrative of their own lives. Such an experience involves linking self to text and representing one's experience through text. This is another example of how literacy constitutes an event of self, and thus may be more wholly understood as human activity that involves more than textual knowledge.

The dialogic self and the reading event

The notion that reading may be thought of as an event of self makes it important to think about how we might define the self that is reading. Constructivist perspectives of self argue that self is fluid and dynamic, and formed in the relationships that make up our lives. As Packer and Greco-Brooks assert, 'such an ontology sees the person as constructed and transformed in social contexts, formed through practical activity in relationships of desire and recognition' (1999: 135). These encounters are imbued with language and other meaning-making systems as a result of our human predilection to form connections with one another. It might be said that we strive to know each other in ongoing acts of meaning making or interpretation. As Heidegger (1996) argues, human beings are thrown into a set of preexisting interpretations. Therefore, 'to be' is to make sense, and in the process to construct ourselves, our worlds, and those around us.

Inherent in this view is the powerful role of language in self-construction. Who we are is integrally shaped by our languaged encounters. As Kirby states, 'self's understanding of itself is mediated primarily through language, where language is taken to be the social medium *par excellence*' (1991: 5). Freeman (1999) adds an important imaginal dimension to this social construction of self, giving more weight to the agentic quality of self-construction. He suggests that self is a 'poetic construction'. Gergen summarizes Freeman's conception of self, describing it as an 'act of imaginative labor in which the daily realities, along with the sea of surrounding words, are molded into a more intense form of reality' (1999: 175).

In this way, self may be seen as an imaginative construction made possible by languaged relationships. Bruner (1986) and others have noted that this imaginative construction might be best described as a 'narrative self' because it is understood and ordered over time and space (Gergen, 1988; Ricoeur, 1991; Sarbin, 1986).

However, an important marker of the socially construed self is that the languaged encounters or dialogues from which self is constructed take place not only in the social world, but also and quite fundamentally within the self. Bakhtin (1981) argues that to carry on a dialogue is a defining activity of self. As Holquist (1990) remarks, 'for him [Bakhtin] self is dialogic, a *relation*' and from a dialogic perspective, 'the very capacity to have consciousness is based on *otherness*'. That is to say that 'to be' is to be in continual dialogue *within the self*, not simply between self and other in the social world. Indeed 'this places dialogue at the very center of our understanding of human life, an indispensable key to its comprehension, and requires a transformed understanding of language. Human beings are constituted in conversation . . . and what gets internalized is . . . the interanimation of its voices' (Taylor, 1991: 313–14). Therefore, not only is the self constructed in relationship with others through language, but the self is itself relational, a dialogic being, typified by ongoing conversations between its various aspects (Hermans and Van Loon, 1992). It is the dialogic nature of self that accounts for the way in which people often acknowledge the experience of having several working identities. In the words of Hermans and Van Loon, the dialogical self is 'a dynamic multiplicity of relatively autonomous I-positions in an imagined landscape' (1992: 20). This depiction of self brings to mind characters in an intricate story.

The 'I' has the possibility to move as in a space, from one position to the other in accordance with changes in situation and time. The 'I' has the capacity to imaginatively endow each position with a voice so that dialogical relations between positions can be established. The voices function like the characters in a story. Once a character is set in motion in a story, the character takes on a life of its own. Each character has a story to tell about experience from its own stance. (1992: 28–9)

This view of self provides a theoretical basis for understanding the reader/text transaction as a dynamic and self-changing process in two ways. First, positing the self as dialogic and therefore flexible and open to transforming language events provides a way to understand why we experience some texts as life changing. *Dialogism identifies and describes qualities of self that allow us to be transformed by a reading event; it provides an explanatory theory for the activity of comprehending itself.* For if we are constituted, constructed, brought into being

through and within dialogue, then all of our dialogic encounters in the social world, within ourselves and with text are contexts for transformation. As Hermans and Hermans-Jansen point out, 'dialogical relationships imply an episodic openness to transformation of the self-system to a new state, resulting in developmental processes of emergence' (2001: 211).

Second, these dialogic qualities can be used as a framework for more specifically identifying the capacities of self necessary for the experience of engaged reading. If, for example, we accept the idea that the mature person is constituted by the simultaneous inter-animation of many characters at any one moment, as well as across time and space, then the event of self is an experience that involves ongoing shifts between characters or self-positions within a larger, continually evolving 'text'. This dialogic ability of the 'I' to inhabit and voice multiple self-positions across time and space is very useful in the reading event. A reader is called on to fictionalize several different roles as he/she takes on multiple positions demanded by the reading such as narrator, character(s) or audience (Chapman, 1978; Ong, 1977). This fictionalization takes place across both real time and fictionalized time, as represented in the text being encountered. Therefore, the ability to 'suspend' one aspect of self, occupying a particular place in time, in deference to another aspect of self, occupying a different place in time, is critical to the vicarious experience of reading. A reader's identification with various self-positions during the reading event might be thought of as a 'fictionalization of self', an extension of our dialogic construction made possible by our very dialogic nature and the text worlds we inhabit. This fictionalization has been noted in young children's storytelling events, suggesting that such dialogic capacity may develop early in life, prior to a child's ability to read conventionally (Scollon and Scollon, 1981).

Taken together, the literature on reading as a transactional relationship between self and text, and the literature on the dialogic self, suggest that the event of reading involves complex processes that go beyond what is required to decode print. Reading demands a kind of dialogic agility, a richness of self, and a critical capacity for the phenomenological experience of self-transformation. As such, it represents not only cognitive and linguistic but also ontological work (Packer and Greco-Brooks, 1999). Yet we have much to learn about the specific nature of this ontological work. The purpose of this study is to foreground the ontological work involved in children's literacy development by documenting and describing the capacities of self in young children made visible in the particular emergent literacy event of wordless book reading. To do this I listened to and analyzed the wordless book reading of 5- and 6-year-old children who were not yet reading conventionally.

Method

Design

This was a descriptive instrumental case study. Stake (2000) describes an instrumental case study as one where a particular phenomenon serves as the case to be explored. In this study 'capacities of self in the emergent reading event' was viewed as the case. In order to gain insight into the capacities of self present in emergent reading I examined 18 children's readings of wordless picture books. Several assumptions undergird this study: (1) self is socially constructed through language and other meaning-making systems; (2) self is dynamic and dialogic; (3) self as a language entity is directly related to the activity of reading; and (4) self is expressed and visible in spoken and written language events.

I hypothesized that the capacities of self required for mature reading experience might show developmental progressions that could be observed in children's emergent readings. Specifically I wondered: (1) in what ways do functions of self reveal themselves in children's readings of a wordless book? (2) In what ways do these functions reflect children's developing self-capacities? (3) How can the presence and functions of these self-capacities inform us about the development of the reader?

Participants

Participants included 18 children of 5 and 6 years old, seven in kindergarten and 11 in first grade, from three small K-2 schools in predominantly white Midwestern communities with high rates of poverty. The white rural poor culture from which these children came was characterized by low literacy rates among the adults, and few available resources for children's development of conventional literacy practices. For example, it was not uncommon for children to come to school with little experience in holding a pencil or using scissors. The oral language used by most families had a strong Appalachian dialect which differed from Standard English in both its grammatical structures and its vowel articulations, making the transition to conventional literacy a more challenging accomplishment for these children. Between 76 and 98 percent of the children in these schools received free or reduced lunch. All the children in the study were identified by their classroom teachers as experiencing language and/or literacy difficulties and were not yet reading conventionally. Twelve of the participants were boys and six were girls. The predominance of boys in the study is not purposeful but is the result of teachers' perceptions that many of the children in their classrooms experiencing difficulties were boys.

Each child participated in a series of emergent literacy assessments for a

period of approximately 45 minutes. During this time, children met with a researcher in a one-on-one situation. The assessments took place in familiar rooms within the schools the children attended. The children were familiar with the researchers as regular visitors to their classrooms as part of an early intervention program in which their teachers were participating.

Procedures

Methodological use of wordless picture books Children's emergent readings have been used as rich methodological tools in early literacy research. Sulzby (1985) used children's familiar readings of picture books to describe a developmental classification scheme for children's pretend readings. Similarly, Purcell-Gates (1996) used children's readings of wordless books to assess written knowledge register. In both cases emergent readings were used as a means of assessing the developing literacy of young children. More recently, Paris and Paris (2003) have used wordless books to assess the developing comprehension abilities of emergent readers.

Likewise I reasoned that children's readings of wordless books could be used as a tool for understanding emergent reading from a self-perspective. In particular, I hypothesized that the use of an unfamiliar wordless book might be an effective invitation for children to demonstrate the developing 'self as reader'. Unlike reading a familiar picture book, an unfamiliar story would provide the children with an open context for self-expression not constrained or guided by specific scripts gleaned from previous encounters with the story. In addition, a book with no print would relieve children of any concerns about decoding, allowing them to focus on the telling of the story. In sum, I reasoned that the unfamiliar wordless book reading would be a context in which children's self-capacities could emerge in a somewhat genuine way, allowing 'self in the reading event' to be made visible.

Wordless book task The wordless book reading task was part of a group of assessments done with the children for the purpose of documenting their literacy capacities and attitudes as part of an early intervention program in which their teachers were participating. Immediately before the wordless book reading task, researchers read a short book to each child. Then the researcher asked, 'Now would you read a story to me?' and handed the child the book. Researchers then read the title of the book to the child, *We Got a Puppy*, pointed to the picture of the children and the dog on the cover, and said, 'This is different from the book I just read to you, because there are no words in it, but you can read it by making up a story using

the pictures.' At the end of the reading we thanked the child for reading to us and praised him or her for the reading he/she had done. Children's readings were audio-recorded and later transcribed verbatim. *We Got a Puppy* published by the Wright Group was the wordless book used for all the children in the study. This book was chosen because the experience of caring for and playing with a pet was central to the story and is a common childhood experience.

The book *We Got a Puppy* is part of a collection of wordless picture books published by the Wright Group called the Wright Way Home, designed to help children become familiar with the way books work. It is 16 pages long with pastel illustrations and depicts a young family's adventure of getting a puppy. Twice during the book the illustrations cover the double page, otherwise there are separate illustrations for each page. The book begins with an illustration of two children, a boy and a girl, riding a bus with a woman that one might assume is the mother. One child is buttoning up his coat. The next illustration depicts a large mother dog with eight puppies surrounding her. The next page shows the children at home. The puppy has crawled under a table and one child appears to be trying to get him out. The next page shows one child getting food for the puppy. Another child is shown bringing a box, apparently in which to put the puppy. Then there is an illustration depicting a child bringing the puppy upstairs in the box. The book shifts to scenes of the children playing outside with the puppy with two adults, a male and female, apparently parents, looking on. The book ends with the children and the mother reading a story to the puppy at what appears to be the end of the day.

Analysis

Analysis of the emergent readings reflected the theoretical orientation to self described earlier. While there was one phase of data collection, the analysis proceeded in two phases reflecting different levels of qualitative interpretation (Merriam, 1998). During the first phase, we sought to answer the first research question: in what ways do functions of self reveal themselves in children's readings of a wordless book? In other words, what positions do children take up when regarding the book? We read and studied a subset of the children's emergent readings, looking for the functions of self visible in the children's renderings of the story. We identified functions of self which included reactor, observer, emergent narrator, developing narrator, and established narrator. After categories were determined, two researchers independently coded all 18 emergent readings, with an interrater agreement of 86 percent.

In the second phase of the analysis, using the same data, we moved to a more conceptual level of interpretive work, assigning a more general code that described the capacities necessary to take up the self-functions identified in the first phase of analysis. In this phase we addressed the second research question: in what ways do these functions reflect children’s developing self-capacities? We used an open coding approach to examine a subset of the data. We moved from describing the particular functions of self present in the data to expressing those functions in the form of the broader concept of self-capacity (Flick, 1998). These conceptual categories are presented in Table 1. Finally, two researchers independently read all of the children’s emergent reading transcriptions, coding each reading using the revised conceptual categories. Independent coding achieved an 88 percent inter-rater agreement. Also in this phase of the analysis, we began to address the third research question by theorizing ways in which children’s self-capacities, as presented in children’s wordless book readings, might inform us about the developing reader.

Results

Phase one: functions of self

In our first analysis, the following functions or self-positions were identified in 18 wordless book readings (see Table 1). Each wordless book reading was considered a whole text, and assigned a label based on the predominance of a particular self-function.

Table 1 Functions of self-positions in emergent readings

<i>Function</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Example</i>
Reactor	Reacts to the page of the book as any object in the world, often with labels	‘doggy’
Observer	Comments from the outside	‘puppy sleeps’
Emerging narrator	Participates using first person	‘They put them in a box’ ‘I’m gonna made them sit down’
Developing narrator	Narrates, authors multiple characters	‘The puppy’s cute, Mommy!’ ‘Soft too, said sister’
Established narrator	Narrates, authors multiple ‘voiced’ characters	‘Once upon a time, he wanted to jump off that, and then they went on this train’

Reactor One child's reading was coded as reactor because his self-position was dominated by simple reactions. This child's reading was characterized by the use of labels and was quite literally linked to single pictures in the book. For example, Tyler, a kindergartner, started with the reading by saying 'People, people, people, people' as he viewed a picture of a family of two children and a mother riding the bus. He then turned the page where he saw a mother dog and a litter of puppies and said 'Puppy, puppy, puppy, puppy, puppy, puppy', apparently trying to use the word 'puppy' once for each puppy he saw on the page. This child seemed to view each page as a discrete entity that elicited an immediate response independent of what came before or after. It was as if the pictures of the wordless book were simply objects in the child's world like a block on the table, or a pencil on a desk.

Observer Emergent readings in which the reader takes up the function of observer were typified by the sense that the reader was standing outside of the book and making comments about the picture. There is a subtle distinction here between reactor and observer. The observer assumes an outsider position by commenting on action in the picture. By contrast, the reactor doesn't seem to define a particular position in direct relation to the book; he/she merely reacts to it as an object in the world. The following section of reading by Brent, a kindergartner, illustrates the observer position:

Them grabbin' the book.
 Them trying to get some milk.
 Then them trying to pet the doggies.
 Them have the doggies.
 Eatin food.
 Them watch and roll down.

As in the reactor examples there are no meaningful links between the pictures in the book.

Emerging narrator Some children created texts that were predominantly from an observer stance but also included statements that demonstrated a shift in position from observer to participant. These readings were coded as emerging narrators because of this occasional shift to a new position, typically first person narration. Such shifts had the effect of placing the child in the story, making these accounts more like narratives. For example Caleb, a kindergartner, read:

There are puppies.
 They play with them.

They put them in a box.
I'm gonna make them sit down.
Made them run.

Another kindergarten reader, Edward, gave this account of the wordless text:

I button up the coat.
Get on bus.
Doggies had puppies.
I have puppy.
Hold me a puppy.
Gonna eat.
It's goin' to sleep.
It look at books with me.

Edward's reading of the lines 'Doggies had puppies' and 'Gonna eat' are recognizable as observer-like comments. Yet these comments are nested in first person expressions, representing a shift in self-position or self-function. In emergent narrator renditions, the children continue to respond to the pictures in the wordless book as discrete units of meaning. In this way their readings are similar to the observers and reactors who all seem temporally bound by each illustration.

Developing narrator A child's emergent reading was labeled as developing narrator when the reader not only adopted the self-position of observer and participant, but began to take on additional roles including narrator and author. Anthony's rendition of *We Got a Puppy* is an example of the developing narrator. Anthony was a first-grade reader.

They are getting ready to go to school.
They are riding the bus to school.
Their puppies and their good dogs came with them.
One little kid tried to get the puppy, it was under the table, and the other one was trying to chase all the puppies out of the house.
And they hugged him and they put him in a box to sleep.
And they went to sleep upstairs.
And the next day they played with the dogs while their grandmother and grandpa was working.
And they told the puppy a story.

Though Anthony's rendition retains the steady rhythm of one sentence or so of reading for each page, typical of observers and emerging narrators, Anthony takes up two new functions of self. He creates connections between parts of the story he is telling (see the first and second lines, for

example) and he interprets. By making connections between the pictures he positions himself not simply as observer or even as participant as in Tyler's use of first person in the earlier example. Rather, Anthony takes on the role of meaning constructor or narrator. Further, he has taken up an authoring function by endowing some of his characters with intention. This occurs in the line, 'One little kid tried to get the puppy, it was under the table, and the other one was trying to chase all the puppies out of the house.' Of course, Anthony's authoring is in collaboration with the author who has done the work of placing the child 'in action' on the page. Therefore, Anthony's authoring might be called co-authoring – the kind of authoring readers do as part of the reader/text transaction.

The role of narrator that Anthony takes up is not yet fully developed. Though we see characters and interpretation, there is not yet a clear sense of audience. That is, the reading has a more descriptive quality (describing a set of pictures) than a 'told' quality. However, some readings from the developing narrator position did contain performance markers such as 'the end', and linguistic connectors such as 'so', 'and', 'then' which demonstrate a more developed commitment to the self-position than that which was seen in the emerging narrator.

Established narrator Children whose wordless book readings were coded as established narrator had a richly developed narrator position in which the work of connecting pictures with a coherent telling is done with some competence. These children also had a clear awareness of audience and frequently used performance markers to begin and end their readings. In addition to the position of narrator, established narrators also took up a more fully developed authoring position in which they created multiple characters. These characters often had a sense of being 'voiced'; that is, they were given distinct personalities by the children through inflection and the presence of emotion in the reading, as well as through dialogue. Alice, who was in first grade, provides us with an example of established narrator.

Once upon a time there was a little girl and a little boy.
 Mother, he was wondering if he could have a puppy?
 His doggie had a puppy.
 There were one, two, three, four, five puppies.
 And the mother took care of them.
 There was a boy chased the mommy doggie off, but the little girl found a small
 little puppy – she called him Max.
 Max had to get fed . . . now on the bed.
 Max was a good dog – he was playing with all the kids when the mommy and

daddy were in the garden. And the mommy, the kid, and the boy and the little girl and the puppy read a book.
The end.

In Alice’s reading we see evidence of self as narrator through the use of two performance markers, indicating awareness of audience, and the attempt to create a meaningful story through the pictures. There also continue to be statements that simply comment on the pictures such as, ‘There were one, two, three, four, five puppies.’

Phase two: capacities of self

In the second phase of analysis, we examined the functions of self presented by the children’s readings and attached them to salient concepts from our theoretical framework, thus moving from the specific to the general for the purpose of theory development (see Table 2). In this way we attempted to answer the question: in what ways do these functions reflect children’s developing self-capacities and how do these capacities relate to reading?

Reactor and observer In wordless book readings where children are reactors or observers, the children demonstrated the capacity to adopt a single position in regard to the text. In both reactor and observer, the reader’s single role is to describe what appears before him or her. What is notable about these readings is not only the absence of narrative, but also the absence of the child being integrally involved in the story. From the child’s perspective it seems that the book is an object to respond to, or a set of ideas to which he/she was not connected. For example, in reader response terms, one might say that while there was some kind of

Table 2 Relationship between functions and capacities of self in emergent readings

<i>Function</i>	<i>Capacity</i>	<i>Quality</i>
Reactor	Single self-position	Perceptual
Observer	Single self-position as ‘outsider’	Descriptive
Emerging narrator	Occasional multiple categories of self-position, including ‘participant insider’	Interpretive
Developing narrator	Frequent multiple categories of self-positions, including narrator, author and characters	Dialogic
Established narrator	Multiple categories of self-positions, including narrator, author and voiced characters	Dialogic

interaction with the book, there was no transaction in which the 'self as reader' merged with the text. A true transaction would require the reader's taking up of a self-position within the book, rather than standing outside of it. The capacity for self-transformation is not made apparent in these readings.

Emerging and developing narrator Children, whose readings were coded as emerging and developing narrators, show capacities for participating in the story, in addition to describing it. That is, more than one self-position was assumed by the children as they regarded the wordless picture book. In these readings we see children beginning to develop the dialogic agility hypothesized as central to mature reading. The use of this dialogic capacity across time and space results in the somewhat narrative feel of these renditions.

For example, Caleb's reading the line 'I'm gonna make them sit down' demonstrates Caleb's capacity to enter into the story rather than simply describing it from the outside. His use of verb tenses indicates his entrance into the story. While it might certainly be regarded as simple tense confusion, it may be that Caleb is imagining himself making the puppies sit down as an action he can do right now (present tense) yet they are already sitting in the picture (past tense). Thus, he tries linguistically to portray both what the picture actually conveys to him and how he might be involved, resulting in the contradictory use of tenses. In this way, Caleb is demonstrating the developing ability to take up more than one self-position when regarding a book; he is simultaneously observing and participating.

Similarly, Edward has found a place for himself in the book from the outset by immediately becoming a character who buttons up his coat. He then shifts self-position to describe the next few pictures from the outside, and then returns again to being in the book. This moment of being in the book represents, using Rosenblatt's terms, a merger of self and text. While neither of these emerging narrators creates clear connections between the pictures, the presence of more than one self-position gives their renditions a more narrative quality than those in which the reader demonstrates a single self-position.

In the developing narrator, we see the presence of multiple self-positions including a narrator position. Importantly, self-positions are maintained across time and space. For example, Anthony's frequent use of 'and' in the iteration 'and they hugged him and they went upstairs' implies an ongoing sequence. Further, Anthony uses a temporal signal 'the next day' making the passage of time even more clear. In the line 'one little kid tried to get

the puppy, it was under the table and the other one was trying to chase all the puppies out of the house', Anthony is able to narrate across space as the teller of the story. In addition, his phrase 'One little kid tries' is an inference about the intention of the character, evidence of his capacity to 'become' the character. Thus, Anthony's rendition has multiple self-positions that show the ability to take place over space and time and the beginnings of a reader/text transaction.

In the following example we see George, a developing narrator and first grader, imbuing his story with emotion through dialogue. In particular the lines 'The puppy's cute, Mommy!' followed by 'Soft too, said sister' show the capacity to take on different positions with different voices and even emerging personalities.

I got a dog, mommy.
 My dog had puppies.
 The puppy's cute, Mommy!
 Soft too, said sister.
 The puppy ate.
 Good night, puppy.
 Where's the other puppy?
 I will read to you.

It is interesting to note that in George's rendition there are characters that show some emotion, yet few narrative techniques that tie the story together as a coherent whole. This indicates perhaps that George has not yet taken up a fully developed role as narrator and hence has a less developed sense of audience.

Established narrator In children whose readings were coded established narrator, we see increased capacity for multiple, flexible, self-positions which is expanded to include a well developed fictionalized audience. These children demonstrate the capacity not only to inhabit a story with characters of different genders, stances and feelings, but to imagine an audience as a part of this set of characters resulting in a more narrative feel. This represents a dialogic capacity, an agility of self-position that affords rich dialogue and movement across time and space. In readings coded 'established narrator' we see a developed sense of audience characterized by the use of performance markers such as 'The end'. For example, in Alice's rendition of *We Got a Puppy* we immediately see self as narrator. She begins, 'Once upon a time there was a little girl and a little boy.' In the very next line, she then shifts to what appears to be the little girl's character by saying 'Mother, he was wondering if he could have a puppy?' This question places her as

an active agent within the story. She then shifts to more narrating, first in a somewhat descriptive role reminiscent of the observer role, and then to a more interpretive role: 'And the mother took care of them.' At the end she wraps up the story by including all the characters in the last line, sounding much like the end of children's story: 'And the mommy, the kid, and the boy and the little girl and the puppy read a book. The end.'

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to foreground the activity of self in literacy development prior to conventional reading. Through this I hoped to help to broaden current perspectives on what it means to learn to read, and to begin to develop new insights into what might help ameliorate early reading difficulties. To do this I listened to, tape recorded and analyzed the wordless book readings of 18 children aged 5 and 6 who had been identified by their teachers as experiencing difficulties with literacy learning. By examining both the self-positions and the capacities necessary for taking up these self-positions during wordless book reading, I have posited a continuum of self-development as it relates to the activity of learning to read in terms of children's capacities for self/text transaction.

Analyses imply that the development of 'self that reads' might be described as a process of accomplishing a complex, flexible, dialogic self-system which then influences both the kind and the amount of transactional relationship a reader has with a text. I have suggested five markers of this development. Beginning with the reactor and moving to the established narrator categories, we see both qualitative and quantitative differences in self-positions and related capacities. Most apparent is the increase in the number of self-positions taken up by readers along the continuum. The observers and reactors reflect places in self-development where children exhibit capacities to adopt only single self-positions in regard to the text. Interestingly, these positions differ qualitatively. The reactor assumes a somewhat ill-defined position in the world alongside of the text with no agentic relation to the text; he/she does not position himself as having influence over any aspect of text construction, an assumption of true reader/text transactions. The observer, on the other hand, takes up a more clearly defined 'outside' position as someone who notices or comments on text. While the degree of agency here is minimal, the simple positioning of 'self as commentator' defines an active role for the reader. This distinction is particularly important as we look at the subsequent moves toward agency exhibited by the emerging narrators. Emerging narrators directly inhabit the landscape of the text by positioning themselves as characters within the

text. This is an interpretive action requiring an imaginative leap in which children are able to invent the actions of characters as well as their intentions as they work with text. This interpretive action is a clear indication of capacity for reader/text transaction. It is important to notice, however, that emerging narrators move in and out of this position of agency, using the observer and reactor positions frequently as if this position of being in the text is slightly new, uncomfortable or simply less practiced.

Further along the continuum, developing narrators continue to inhabit the text in first person fashion, though more regularly than do the emerging narrators, and also begin to fictionalize an audience and hence develop narrative qualities. While of course there is a person present as the child renders her/his version of the wordless book, the audience that we hear in the developing narrators, and later in the established narrators, has a presence within the telling itself. There is an awareness of audience as another character, someone who makes demands on the characters and narrator as they carry out their reading.

The transition from developing to established narrator is primarily one of degree. Here the child's telling regularly reflects the presence of an imagined audience, and the characters that are created are richly voiced. The word 'voice' is used here in a Bakhtinian sense, meaning the child is able to imbue the character with personality (Bakhtin, 1981). While the most concrete indication of this is the presence of dialogue, it is the animation of the character that is most characteristic of this capacity. The ability to voice characters seems to reflect a capacity for occupying with depth and resonance a variety of rather different self-positions. Such a capacity provides a reader with a rich self/text transaction as he/she is able to connect with a variety of others in the world of text. Such a capacity, what Wilhelm (1997) refers to as 'being the book', is necessary for successful comprehension.

Theoretically, it seems that the nature of interpretation is made possible by dialogic capacities. That is to say, we make sense of others by positioning ourselves in meaningful relation to them. We cannot do this without first interpreting who they are and dialogically experiencing the other within ourselves. This is consistent with Heidegger's notion of being as an act of interpretation, and Bakhtin's notion that self is in itself a conversation between self and others. What is most interesting is that the presence of multiple self-positions – the capacity for dialogism in the children – seems to define their narration. In other words, children's dialogic capacities may be what *enables or affords* the comprehension abilities described in other work (Paris and Paris, 2003; Sulzby, 1991). That is, the understanding of stories is predicated upon one's ability to *participate in them*; a child 'understands'

stories by first experiencing them as an event of the self, a merger of their personal narrative and the narrative of the book. This seems consistent with Halliday's (1975) assertion that children learn about language through the use of language, as well as with Rosenblatt's assertion that the act of reading is an event in which aspects of the reader and aspects of the text come together in unique personal ways (the poem) which represents 'understanding'.

It is important to note that this study suggests only that children's self-capacities may fall along a continuum in relation to the wordless book reading event. Children may demonstrate different capacities in different language and literacy contexts. For example, as has been noted by scholars from a variety of disciplines, children are able to invent imaginary characters at a very young age and have little difficulty inhabiting an imagined landscape. However, the focus of this study is the development of self-capacities within a book reading event, that is, to look at developing self-capacities in relation to written text. In such a context, the presence of the book's author as an authoritative voice (Bakhtin, 1981) may influence what children do in their readings. Indeed, part of the developing 'self as reader' may be to gain enough confidence in one's self-positions to override the author in the authoring role. In addition, the notion that there is one right way to read a book may interfere with what children do with the wordless books in their emergent readings.

It is interesting to consider the implications of a focus on the developing self as reader when assessing and evaluating children's literacy development. It seems likely that children with particular kinds of language and literacy backgrounds would have more opportunity to develop capacities of 'self as reader'. That is to say, children whose early years provided not only for frequent storybook reading events, but also for opportunities in which they were able to take on the roles of make believe characters in symbolic play, would have more opportunities to develop capacities necessary for reading. The notion that symbolic play influences later literacy development is not new. The 'other worldliness' of fantasy play experiences involving the representation of one thing for another has been noted as a significant influence on a child's later capacity for entering into the symbolic world of texts. However, the study of self as reader more specifically articulates why that is so, and the particular ways in which children use their dialogic capacities to 'become the book'. Indeed, children's reading comprehension abilities in the early years are now being given more attention as we see children able to decode texts but failing to achieve a deep understanding. While comprehension strategies themselves may be valuable in helping children construct relationships with and among texts,

the fundamental capacities to use these strategies may be the result of something more fundamental. The development of the self that reads through rich and varied story experiences may be a necessary prerequisite for employing such strategies in the act of reading. That is to say, the capacity to take up multiple positions in a text may be grounded in early oral language experiences and in the relationships that embody them. Without such self-capacities born of these relationships with people and stories, comprehension strategies become tools for which the young readers have no useful context. Early intervention and remediation programs may do well to focus on the remediation of self to other and self to world and self to story through reading aloud, talk and dramatic play prior to any focus on print knowledge and strategy instruction. Instructional implications seem clear: an early focus on mastering of print aspects of literacy alone may not provide young children, particularly those with fewer opportunities for experiencing story and fantasy play at home, with the resources necessary for becoming capable, confident readers. Perhaps a return to a more playful curriculum, one with more frequent opportunities for taking up multiple self-positions in play and in storytelling of all kinds, would better facilitate the emergence of literacy.

Limitations

There are some limitations to this study. Wordless book readings are but a snapshot of what may be happening within the child's development of 'self as reader'. Wordless book readings over time, from before the child reads conventionally to after, may provide important information about the development of the dialogic self in literacy events not made apparent in this study.

Additionally, this study makes no attempt to link the children's readings to their home environments and cultural backgrounds, or to the instructional contexts of their kindergarten and first-grade classrooms. That is to say, this work does not suggest specific reasons for particular capacities of particular children, but rather only describes and interprets those capacities. Lastly, this study focuses exclusively on the developing self in regard to narrative reading. Future studies may attend to dialogic capacities in a non-fiction reading event.

Conclusion

Children's readings of wordless books have proven to be a valuable resource for understanding children's literacy and self-development. In this study, I

have documented changes in self-positions and their related capacities along a continuum. The question remains: in what ways might this analysis change the way we regard emergent literacy in general, or the teaching of early and emergent readers? The presence of particular self-functions and their representative capacities suggest that children develop many aspects of themselves that are related to the reader/text transaction over time. While it seems clear that one's ability to connect the self world to the text world through decoding during the early years is of indisputable importance, it also seems plausible to suggest that the development of self-capacity for inhabiting that text world is likewise of critical importance.

This raises the question: in what ways do our current curricula afford opportunities for engaging in the ontological work of reading, the self-activity of becoming a reader? If we are constituted by, through and within meaning-making events, then a curriculum rich with opportunities for authentic encounters with literacy and with others in purposeful, meaningful work is essential. The current focus on print related knowledge and the reduction of curricular activities involving storytelling and play may work to inhibit the ontological work of early childhood that leads to literacy learning. While some argue that emergent literacy by definition is about learning the forms and functions of print, it seems clear that those forms and functions constitute simply the surface structures of knowledge about language. Such surface-level knowledge is only as useful as the deep structures that have been built in the self, those dialogic encounters that afford rich generative experiences in the world of text. Acknowledging the importance of development of the 'self that reads' and the self-capacities that are shaped during early childhood may be an important addition to how we define emergent literacy and how we approach young readers and writers instructionally. It seems that if we are committed to helping children emerge into literacy we must find ways to help our young children continue to nourish and develop themselves as complex, dialogic human beings.

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