Young Children Constructing Their Worlds Through Literacy: Reading, Writing, and Finding Voice

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Ling 96
May 15, 1994
Background and Introduction

Black Pond Road is four miles of asphalt, winding and dipping amongst ancient birches and stubborn farmhouses. The condition of the road itself, the weather-dug trenches and the bent decrepit look of the trees, beyond tell of harsh New Hampshire winters, relentless and perennial. On my first trip down this daunting lane, I thought I must certainly be in the wrong place. It couldn't possibly be there that I would spend my summer, nor could it be that 150 young troubled children from the heart of Boston, Massachusetts would arrive in less than a week to share their summers in this isolated nook. It couldn't possibly be.

Just when I thought I should turn the car around, I spotted another sign at a fork in the road. It read simply "Wediko" and pointed left. To the right, a sign for Interlocken music camp, decorated with delicate black notes and flowers, swung in the late June breeze. I headed left, and soon came upon a standard yellow road sign that warned "school." I thought that strange, certainly there couldn't be even the smallest of neighborhood schools in this neck of the woods. I chuckled to myself. This was what people meant when they used that cliché. This had to be the very definition of "neck of the woods." The road dipped suddenly, then turned to dirt, crossed a bridge, and I realized the "school" sign referred to my destination; more a school than a camp. To my right, Black Pond reached out from under the bridge and across to Black mountain on its opposite bank. Ahead of me, a crowd of young people, some apparently familiar with the place, others as overwhelmed as I, mingled at the dead end of Black Pond Road.

The irony in the location of Wediko Children's Services' New Hampshire setting is that what happens there, each summer and winter, is as unlike a dead end as anything. This natural "setting" is a short-term residential treatment facility for emotionally disturbed young people. The oldest such facility in the country, it is
best described as a mental hospital in the woods. By no stretch, however, is it a dead end. For many of its young clients, Wediko is an alternative to more traditional institutionalization, or even incarceration. In this sense, it can be considered a last chance. A child rarely leaves the program having made no progress. The Wediko staff ensures that a child’s stay at the facility is always a beginning, never an end. While many of the children require further residential treatment, and always further support and follow-up, few leave the program without increased hope for their ability to face and handle their futures.

I arrived at this anomaly of a mental health facility with a vague understanding of its purpose but not the vaguest notion of the daily functioning of the place. I was hired to work in the educational part of the program, teaching children in four developmental groups math and language arts skills to complement their therapeutic programs, but I was not assured that this assignment would indeed prove to be my position. Last minute changes were common and necessary at Wediko, I’d been told, as placement and other logistics could be tricky with this population of children and families. I might well find myself working in a completely different part of the program by the time the children arrived, but this was the least of my initial concerns. Foremost in my mind was the overwhelming sense of inadequacy, the bewilderment that washed over me when I thought, probably for the first time since I submitted my application five months earlier, about how underqualified I was to help the children who would arrive in just six short days. What I learned in those six days is that there was no such thing as being qualified in the sense that I had imagined. There were no first year staff who were qualified to treat the children. Only these children themselves, day after day and then summer after summer, offering unpredictable and mind-boggling challenges, could qualify a staff member to do his or her job. This lesson would prove among
the most important of the thousands I would learn, slowly and exhaustingly or
quickly and sharply, over the course of the summer. I had no choice but to make
mistakes. I had no choice but to depend on those with more experience. I had no
choice but to learn from the children about their lives, their behavior, and their
minds and hearts, as they learned from me. For the first time in my life, I couldn’t
possibly be ready for what I was about to do.

My experience at this facility profoundly changed the way I think about
children, about education, and about the healing process. I have grown used to the
idea of learning from the children and my experiences with them for the rest of my
life. Ten months after I watched them climb on the bus back to Boston, I still
dream about them and wonder how I could have done more with them, what I
would do if I had another day with them. I have also struggled to find a way to put
some of the many pieces together in such a way that some or even one of the ways
they opened my eyes could appear in a structured and coherent way, preferably
something that will or has influenced the way I teach. For some reason it is
important to me that I find a way to illustrate the emotional, professional, and
pedagogical progress I made in my eight weeks at Wediko in the context of my
college education. Although the experience itself was far removed from my
academic life at Swarthmore, it has changed the way I learn and the way I think
about learning. That change makes it profoundly relevant to my work here.

It has never been easy for me to incorporate my practical experiences into my
academic work, and I have spent a good part of my senior year struggling to make
that connection. What I have finally settled on is an issue not only closely related
to my major, but close to my heart and my struggle to survive the rigor of
Swarthmore. This struggle of mine has been one of coming to understand and
appreciate the language of this school, a language I could speak but not write when
I arrived as a freshman. I saw a similar struggle in the children I worked with at Wediko, whose challenge for the summer was in large part learning to use spoken language to express and cope with their emotions. While I have spent hours moving my words around in such a way that they do what they are expected to do in the context of academia, the children spent and continue to spend days, weeks, months, their very lives, learning to use speech and language to make sense of their chaotic lives.

I began to think of these struggles as issues of literacy, and what it means to be literate. I believe the definition of literacy is thus an important one in the progress toward a more comprehensive approach to facilitating literacy development. I had a vague notion that literacy should refer to more than reading and/or writing, as I’d grown used to thinking about it throughout my own literacy development.

I grew curious as to where my assumptions about literacy and its limits came from, and began looking for the origins of these assumptions. What I discovered is that much of what was written about literacy-related issues when I was growing up, in the 1970s, is concerned only with reading. Many theory and methods books I found from that time period discuss at length the difference between a reader and a non-reader, addressing the challenge of moving a child from reader to non-reader status. In Learning to Teach Reading in the Elementary School, for example, the young reader is identified as someone who can not only decode strings of letters but explain the meaning of the words he¹ is decoding (Olson & Dillner, p. 7). The adult reader is identified as someone who can use reading as a tool in everyday life, for

¹I sat here for a moment of silence and dilemma, deciding whether to revert to the generic he, which is used exclusively in all the books I looked at from the 70s. Not so much as a he or she appeared in any basal or teacher text, and I would have liked to address this fact. I shall resist the temptation to diverge, and leave it at this sidetrack.
such tasks as looking up numbers in the phone book and filling out tax forms.\footnote{Again, a temptation to sail off into the dreamy sunset of my own troubles with assumptions about children and teaching. This clear distinction between child readers and adult readers implies that children are not real readers and cannot use language for real things, while adults can. For children, reading is a task to be completed in a satisfactory way for their age group or grade level, while for adults it is something to assist in their daily functioning. If children were treated like real readers, not only would they not require basal readers and discrete reading skills, they might enjoy reading and understand it as a valuable part of their lives.}

For the child or for the adult, these assumptions about reading constitute a deficit model in which a person is either able to read or is not able to read. In most of the books I unearthed on the subject, young non-readers were regarded as lacking a skill they could still acquire and older non-readers were regarded as a lost cause of sorts. The implication seemed to be that if they had been taught to read they wouldn't have to rely so heavily on others to assist in their day to day lives (Olson & Dillner).

As I expected, I found little room in these older conceptions and assumptions around literacy for the likes of my current thoughts and struggles. I turned to more recent research and commentary on the nature of language for a broader, more flexible definition of literacy which would give me room to think and learn about how language works not only in print but in thought and emotion.

In this paper I will consider the development of literacy an ongoing process. I believe that literacy is not a mere matter of reading or not reading, but rather how a person uses language in the various and complex contexts of her life, therefore literacy continues to develop as long as a person encounters and learns to function in new contexts. Literacy is thus a dynamic and non-linear process through which a learner makes sense of her environment and her place in that environment.

In considering this kind of emergent literacy, which situates a person in her world, I needed a model of literacy which, unlike the linear deficit model, considered reading a process in which the reader interacted with a number of social
and cognitive factors to make meaning from text. What I found was a model constructed by Katherine Maria, who writes about reading comprehension. She refers to reading comprehension, in *Reading Comprehension Instruction: Issues and Strategies*, as “helping children to understand text.” Her model is interactive, describing reading comprehension as an “interactive, constructive, and holistic” process. The interactive aspect of the model refers to the relationships between the components of the reading process: the reader, the text, and the situation. Not only does each of these components rely on the others for comprehension to occur, they influence and shape the way the other components function. Maria considers reading a constructive process because the reader is as she reads a particular text in a particular situation creating meaning for the text as well as creating an understanding of what it means for her to read that text. “The writer constructs a message, and the reader reconstructs that message based on his ability and prior knowledge.” (p.7) The text is not considered a static and independent entity, but rather a “blueprint” for meaning, a set of tracks or clues that the reader builds as he builds a model of what the text means” (Pearson, 1985, p. 726). Finally, reading is a holistic process where the reader must do more than master all the discrete skills involved in reading. If the reader is not able to coordinate the various skills and types of knowledge required for reading, she is not reading. This view of reading is

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3This quotation from Maria’s book marks the first of many potentially distracting issues which will arise in my paper. In this case, and in all following cases, I will address the issue (often with questions, occasionally with commentary) briefly in a footnote to ensure that I give the issue the attention I feel it deserves without losing the focus of the paper.

My trouble with any definition of comprehension is closely related to the trouble I have with criticizing and analyzing literature. I have never felt comfortable stating what is merely my interpretation of a particular text as an “understanding” of the text. What does it mean to understand? Does understanding automatically involve interpretation? Does the understanding change the understood, as the observer changes the observed? Can a person ever truly claim to understand something that someone else has written?
characteristic of the widely discussed "whole language" approach to teaching reading and writing. While educators have a wide spectrum of practical conceptions of whole language, the whole language movement's general premise is that language should be taught in its real form rather than fragmented into discrete skills. Students of any language should learn by doing things with language rather than to language. (Rigg, p. 529) The whole language movement has sought to provide students who are emerging readers and writers with a literacy experience grounded in real literature rather than one made up of isolated skills and strategies like decoding and "finding the main idea," which are traditionally found in language arts curricula.

Maria's theoretical model of the reading process has three major components: the reader, the text, and the teacher/school environment. Each of these components informs and influences the others, providing the interactive aspect of making meaning from text. Each brings its own complex set of factors to the reading process, and each of these factors is affected somehow when it comes in contact with those of other reading process components.

The Reader

The reader is often the main focus of the reading process, particularly in the case of young emerging readers who have difficulty becoming literate. Students are often labeled "good" or "bad" readers according to their performance on various measuring devices including standardized tests, oral reading performance in the classroom, and comprehension questions provided by individual teachers or textbooks. As a result of this tendency to label and categorize readers, the blame for the reading trouble is assigned to the reader in most cases to the person with the trouble, rather than to the interaction of the various factors involved in the
process. Maria’s claim is that the reader is only part of the process, and therefore all troubles the reader has must be attributed not only to her but to the text and the teacher or school environment as well. The reader brings with her to the reading process a history with text, print, and language which will profoundly influence her response to text. Her knowledge of the linguistic aspects of language; vocabulary, sentence structure, and narrative and expository schema influence how she analyzes text. Her knowledge about reading strategies and her awareness of herself as a reader affect how she approaches reading. Finally, her interest in the task of reading, and perhaps the text in particular, can significantly change the task of reading for her.

The Text

The text used to teach a person to read is a crucial part of the learning process. Traditionally, appropriate texts are determined according to word and sentence length. Readable texts are assigned to an age or grade level, and students at that level are expected to master those texts in the time allotted for that particular level. The somewhat arbitrary assignment of readability levels does not take into account the various and dynamic skills and knowledge which the reader brings to the particular text she is to learn. Maria’s model seeks to expand the mechanism for

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1 Maria notes that this is a particularly acute problem when children are labeled learning disabled, as the assignment of such a label often means the teacher or school needn’t take responsibility for the child’s reading problem because it is then attributable to some dysfunction in her brain. The problem of labeling students, particularly in the public school systems where a label can have a profound effect of a child’s educational opportunity, is a crucial and growing issue. Learning disabilities are treated in a dangerously bipolar fashion; a child either has a particular learning disability, and is therefore entitled to service outside the classroom, or she does not, and is therefore expected to perform on the same level as do other “non-disabled” students. There is no room in such a paradigm for the scores of children who don’t happen to fit the particular profiles of the learning disabled or otherwise challenged which have been established as credible.
determining appropriate reading material to take into account those skills and
knowledge in hopes of providing the student with a more grounded and effective
reading experience. Many teachers have found that using children's literature to
teach reading can be more effective than using the traditional basal readers. While
the authors of basal reader texts are constrained by the word and sentence length
readability issue, authors of children's literature attend to the writing of the book.
Using children's literature is thus an approach more geared toward whole language,
wherein the child receives a more realistic literature experience rather than a
fragmented superficial glimpse of the literate world. This is not to say that the
language of the text is not important and should not be considered in the choosing
of appropriate text. An appropriate text choice will include such considerations as
content and topic, language (vocabulary, sentence structure, expository and
narrative schema), and genre.

The Teacher/School Environment

Maria considers the teacher and the school environment part of the same
component because the teacher often determines the nature of the school or class
environment. In a similar sense, the teacher is the part of the school
environment with which the reader and text are in most direct contact. I will

5 The controversial issue of choice is yet another which is particularly tempting at this point in my
paper. The assumption in this discussion of text in the learning of reading makes the unpleasant
assumption that the choosing of text is up to the teacher or the school. While the argument that
teachers should choose real quality literature with which to teach reading is valid and has been
proved effective, there is a great deal to be said for sharing the responsibility of choosing text with
the students, if not allowing them full control of their reading schedules. One of the original premises
of whole language was that students would be active participants in their literature experiences, both
creating text of their own and exploring text which already exists. This exploration requires that they
take part in the choice of text. At the very least, they must join their teachers in the quest for
appropriate literature.
consider the teacher and the school environment one and the same for the purposes of this paper.⁶

The teacher component of the process is potentially the most flexible and dynamic. The teacher's management and teaching skills and the kind of climate she creates for learning to read are crucial in the learning process. The teacher not only chooses the text with which the learner will interact, but she also provides the particular climate or environment in which the learner must interact with that text. How successful any reader/text system is can be largely dependent upon the flexibility and experience of the teacher. Maria addresses this aspect of the learning process most explicitly in Reading Comprehension Instruction. Her suggestions for inviting emergent readers to be members of a "literacy club" (Frank Smith, 1971, Understanding Reading) by joining the literate classroom community specifically address and illustrate her reader-text-teacher model.

Katherine Maria's model for developing reading comprehension skills is an important conception of literacy not only because it takes into account a number of different factors influencing the reading process but also because it is applicable to other learning processes. For my purposes, Maria's model is helpful because it lends itself well to the consideration of other interactive, constructive, holistic

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⁶For the purposes of this paper, the teacher and school environment are not only assumed to be more or less the same, they are assumed to be in some semblance of harmony. In practical reality, the teacher and the "school environment" may well be in conflict with one another, rendering this a rather inaccurate account of the emergent literacy systems in many schools. The school environment is not only that the teacher provides or wants to provide for the reader but also that which is provided by other students and teachers with whom the reader is in frequent contact. The environment in the school library, for instance, can also have a great deal of effect on how or if the student learns to read. If the teacher and her approaches to literacy development are in conflict with other aspects of the school environment, the learning process is further complicated. On the other more positive hand, a teacher in synch with her school environment working for the whole literacy development of the student can greatly enhance that student's literacy experience.
literacies. My ideas about the more flexible and broadly defined sense of literacy wherein the reader might be reading a text other than that which is printed and/or published are in synch with Maria's model.

It is with this new and more flexible perspective on literacy that I continue my story of living and learning with severely troubled young people whose concerns were not as much establishing themselves as readers and writers of print but rather as speakers and comprehenders of a spoken language, used for expressing thought and emotion.

I must first backtrack several months from the day I actually arrived at the New Hampshire setting. I spent the previous summer working with a small group of children in a city in Utah. I had found a part time job supervising daily recreational activities in a city park near the house where I was staying. It was a fairly low-key position, but I had been warned that the particular park placement which my late application had earned me was the toughest. Veteran park program leaders told me the kids were trouble, and that I should brace myself for a long summer. What I found was not trouble but a desperate need for care and attention.

My Utah kids came from homes in which the parent or parents worked hard to support their children and provide good homes for them but couldn't always find the time and energy to give them what they needed in the way of attention. I found a great deal of satisfaction in the opportunity to give them some of my time, of which there is still much to spare. For the most part, the kids only wanted for someone to listen to them during those long hot Utah days. Often they would express that desire by breaking rules, picking fights, defying anything and everything they could find to defy. When first I began to work with them, I couldn't help but wonder why they were the way they were, why they couldn't just behave, and why their parents couldn't just take better care of them. As I got to
know them better, it became clear to me that it wasn’t at all as simple as any of that. Jimmy wasn’t intimidating to the other kids because he was mean, he was intimidating because he’d learned that threatening someone was the way to let them know they were doing something to upset him. I finally began to figure some of it out when, on a particularly patient day of mine, Jimmy was careening around on his bicycle knocking into people and hollering in the girls’ ears, I plucked him off his banana seat and sat his ten year old body on my knees. “Jimmy,” I said, “you’re sitting right here on my lap until you can calm down.” I figured there couldn’t be anything more humiliating and distasteful to a tough little guy like Jimmy than to have to sit on with me in front of all the other park kids. Jimmy sat wrapped in my arms for the better part of an hour, chatting contentedly with me and the group of girls playing Yahtzee on the table beside us. Every so often he would feign protest, requesting at the top of his lungs that he be released soon, clearly for the benefit of male passersby. Jimmy and children with similar coping strategies to his need nothing more than to be understood and to understand, a task altogether more complicated for a child with few present role models than for a child in a prosocially language rich environment. There was very little doubt left in my mind, when my summer with Jimmy and his friends and foes from the park was over, that I would find myself doing similar work for the next several months, if not several years, of my life.

I heard about Wediko a few months later in early February, when I happened to be on the lookout for summer employment. I was hoping against hope that I could find a job similar to my park job which might involve more than organizing kickball games while attending to the kids. Wediko’s summer program, which seeks to provide an environment in which troubled children can learn to understand and be understood through individualized psycho-educational and
recreational programs, was just the kind of program I was looking for. As a member of the Wediko staff, I would be responsible for helping to provide that environment. The children who spend their summers at Wediko become more literate young people by learning to interpret the language of the community, a language which emphasizes expression of thought and emotion.

The Children

Children often arrive at Wediko having tried desperately throughout their young lives to influence how those lives progressed. Frequently this desperate attempt has meant the children’s behavior frustrated their biological, adoptive, or foster families to such an extent that they were physically abused or removed from their homes. The children have learned, somewhere along the line, that they have no control over what happens to them and they must therefore take out their confusions and desperation on anything and everything which appears in their way.  

Reasons for referral to the program are many and complex. The troubled children Wediko seeks out are the ones who suffer from emotionally and physiologically-based language deficits which hinder their ability to make sense of their places in communities which send mixed verbal and physical messages. Many have been abused or taken out of their homes, others struggle with various neurological and behavioral disorders.

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7 This description of the children's backgrounds is purposefully general and sometimes vague. One of the important pieces of the whole overwhelming puzzle that I learned during my work in the program is that the children’s behaviors and what they show about themselves and their coping strategies is more helpful to those who are trying to help them make sense of their worlds than is the particular behavior or diagnosis that earned them the referral in the first place.
Understanding the Text of the Past, Present, and Future

Children join the Wediko summer program in order to learn how to make sense of their lives and worlds in much the same way that emerging readers learn to make sense of printed text. Children find their words at Wediko, the literacy that allows them to interact with others, to express themselves in prosocial ways. The children come to Wediko to learn to understand and cope with the challenges they meet in their lives. Whether those challenges are related to neurological dysfunctions or factors of their particular social environments, the children will need strategies throughout their lives for handling them. For children who function "normally", strategies for coping with upheaval of one sort or another which occur in the course of one’s life develop in the course of this “normal” development. For these children, the strategies are simply not there. Most of them are not only inexperienced in using language for expressing their emotions, but they are deeply confused about those emotions, mixing most everything with anger and expressing it through physical aggression. Wediko’s program is based on a principle of linguistic determinism in which thought relies on language for its parameters. If a child is able to articulate her frustration, anger, or confusion, she is able to recognize and handle that upset. If she cannot find the words, she cannot identify the thoughts or feelings. Linguistic determinism is the source of great controversy in linguistics and many related fields because there it is difficult to establish which comes first, language or thought. The Whorfian hypothesis continuum accounts for the uncertainty of linguistic determinism, where a strong

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8Normal functioning here refers to a set of behaviors which characterize the daily functioning of a person who has adjusted successfully to the particular reality of her life. I have trouble using the phrase because it's difficult to refer to one thing as normal and another as abnormal in any circumstances. In this case what I mean by normal is behavior which renders an individual capable of functioning in whatever social environment she is a part.
Whorfian hypothesis claims language determines thought entirely, and a weak Whorfian hypothesis states that thought precedes language. Al Bloom’s research on native Chinese and English speakers addresses this issue in depth. In “The linguistic shaping of thought: A study in the impact of language on thinking in China and the West,” Bloom uses the “counter-factual” to investigate the complex and evasive relationship between language and thought. Bloom attempts to answer this classic question of whether language shapes thought or thought develops and operates somehow independently of language. The controversy over this question began with the claim that “we dissect nature along lines laid down by our native languages” (Whorf, in Hakuta, p.75). This hypothesis of linguistic determinism is most simply exemplified by the variation of referents from one culture to the next. A commonly used close-to-home example is that of the Alaskan and contiguous-United States concepts of snow. In Alaska, where there is much and varied snowfall, there are many different words to describe the precipitational phenomenon whereas in the contiguous United States, there is but a single four-letter word. As “snow” is not one of the primary concerns for most U.S. residents, they have no reason for describing its many intricate forms. The Alaskan population, however, is greatly affected by the varying timing and consistency of “snow,” and thus uses a number of different referents. Many linguists and psychologists have tested the Whorfian hypothesis in many different “strengths.” Bloom takes a Whorfian position which might be more accurately considered complex rather than strong or weak, because it addresses the nature of the relationship between language and thought more than the strength of the relationship.

Bloom uses the “counter-factual,” “a distinct linguistic structure inviting listeners to ponder a state of affairs considered to be false,” to examine the
language/thought interaction. He offers American and Chinese subjects this linguistic structure, which appears frequently in English but not in Chinese, in each of their two languages in order to find out whether this structure translates easily. If the subjects could easily handle the linguistic concept in both languages, the evidence would not support the Whorfian hypothesis. What Bloom found was that the concept did not prove easily handled by the Chinese speakers for whom it was foreign, thus supporting the Whorfian hypothesis. The nature of the Chinese language proved to be such that the counter-factual was not within the repertoire of its speakers, and was therefore at least partially determined by the language itself. This study and other similar attempts at understanding the thought-language connection indicate that the relationship may simply not reduce to a linear order. It may well be that neither language nor thought can precede the other, and therefore a more complex and dynamic model is required for more thorough understanding of the relationship.

For purposes of assisting troubled children in their quest for greater understanding and peace in their chaotic worlds, it is enough that language seems to make some kind of contribution to the ordering of reality. Whether or not a more proficient level of language capacity influences their thought and internal coping mechanisms, it succeeds in creating an outlet through which they can release some of the anguish which has built up over time. It may well be that the children who learn to access spoken expressive language while at Wediko are the ones who had already developed the capacity to make sense of themselves and their surroundings, and that others simply could not make the connections between language and thought which gave order to their ecological systems.
The Setting: A Structured Environment for Finding Words

The isolated “setting” in which the Wediko summer program takes place is designed to provide the environment in which the children will do the work of finding the words they need to understand their past and future lives. The physical setting is made up of several acres of wooded land and a group of cabins and activity buildings, arranged much like a summer camp. For many of the children, the Wediko summer setting is the first experience they’ve had in the woods. While the novelty of the setting is often frightening to the young urban residents, they notice quickly that there is a quiet safety in the isolation.

Though it looks very much like the everyday summer camp to the occasional visitor, the only clue to its unique nature is the abundance of wooden benches, obviously organized carefully outside of each building. The benches, one soon learns upon arrival at the facility, are “transition spots,” where groups of children catch their literal and figurative breaths between activities. While they make up only a small part of the setting and the program itself, transition spots say a great deal about the structure of the environment. During the week of orientation and training for the summer endeavor, new staff hear over and over that the “program is the primary intervention.” At Wediko, an intervention refers to anything a staff member does to remind a child of why she is there and assist her in finding a more effective way to handle any given situation. Interventions are for the most part of a physical or verbal nature, occurring throughout the day in connection and relation to any and all activities. The “program” refers to the careful and deliberate structure of the community. Its designers believe that the program itself, the characteristics which provide the children with a much needed sense of stability and safety, is the most effective of all interventions. The idea that the program is the “primary intervention” reflects the philosophy that what children with chaotic
lives need most to begin to make sense of their worlds is structure. Whether a child has been placed and replaced and displaced in foster and adoptive care throughout his or her young life or has a chemical imbalance which renders him or her virtually incapable of processing any kind of communication from the world around him or her, the structure of a reliable daily schedule is essential to any sort of treatment plan. The various components of the program serve their purposes as well, but this first “intervention,” this overarching measure which says to the child “things are different here,” is what holds the whole system together. An entire summer’s worth of therapeutic interventions, in which a child in this population was asked to work through any or all of his or her troubles could not succeed without the assurance that he or she was in a safe, predictable place.

The staff is crucial to the successful execution of that program. Wediko’s program is a vastly complex one, which requires not only experienced supervisors to oversee the operation of clinical teams but also an energetic staff of coordinators to see that the setting runs in the efficient manner on which the children, as well as the whole staff, come to rely. Within the junior staff there are three kinds of responsibility. The direct care staff are those who remain with a group of children throughout the day, accompanying them to every meal and activity, and sleeping with them in the cabin. Activities staff spend most of the day with their assigned children, leaving only for a two hour planning and supervision period during which they organize and oversee a particular activity to which other staff bring their charges. The teaching staff spends most of every day in the school, teaching four different age groups. Teachers join their assigned groups for meals and early evenings before returning to their classrooms for late-night planning sessions. During orientation and training, we learned quickly how the program functioned day to day, or more accurately, minute to minute. Our first day of training was
scheduled to the minute, from 8 am until 10 pm. Breakfast, breakfast clean-up, announcements, work projects, large group discussion, lunch, lunch clean-up, large group discussion, work projects, organized play, dinner, dinner clean-up, large group discussion, entertainment. This hectic and precise schedule was meant not only to keep us busy and working together, but also to simulate the program the children would follow every single day for their forty-five days. We were told that the children would grow, as we did, quickly and completely addicted to the program itself, its predictability and reliability. We got immediately used to knowing exactly when and where everything would happen, how it would happen, and who would be there. This was a crucial part of our training because it gave us a sense of what a difference it could make, even to us, to be able to anticipate at least some small part of what would happen to you when you found yourself in a new and emotionally challenging environment.

The 150 children in the summer program are separated into four groups, determined by the age and developmental level of the summer’s enrolled cohort. Each group follows a developmentally appropriate program involving recreational and educational activities designed to jump start the social interaction skills which their various emotional disturbances have interrupted. Students in the oldest developmental group, for example, spend part of their day working either in the kitchen preparing food or in the cabins doing general maintainence tasks in order to prepare them for the responsibility of employment. Students in the youngest group spend time each day working on tasks involving motor skills they often have yet to develop.

Within the developmental groups, there are several cabin groups, structured in such a way that they resemble functional family units. A cabin group is frequently made up of ten children and six or seven staff members. Children are
placed in cabin groups according to developmental level as well as the potential
group dynamics. There are typically four boys' cabin groups in each developmental
group and one girls' cabin group. As in Maria's model of the reading
comprehension process, all of these environmental factors influence the
development of literacy. The children's histories of confusion, chaos, and abuse are
as relevant to their developing understanding of language as an expressive and
interpretive tool as is the safe, predictable environment at Wediko.

My experience with this special needs population helped me to gain a more
thorough understanding of the learning process. The children's learning needs
were so acute that they often changed drastically not only from context to context
but also from moment to moment. My experience with one child in particular
inspired my thinking about expanding and flexible conceptions of what it means to
be literate.

Chaquia's struggle to find her words

I was one of the few junior staff members blessed and cursed with the dual
role of teacher and cabin group counselor. I spent my days working with four
classes of children ranging in age from six to eighteen, and the early mornings and
evenings with a group of girls between nine and eleven years of age. While this
responsibility was at times the most terrible situation I could imagine, because I
couldn't be the teacher I wanted to be or the counselor I wanted to be as I balanced
the two roles, it was also an advantage because I could work with some of the

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6 The particular pathologies which often lead to referral of Wediko children is such that the
program is more accessible to boys than to girls. Behaviors which disrupt classrooms and families are
more common in boys than girls. Depression and withdrawal, frequent signs of disturbance in girls,
rarely lead to such referral, because they are often mistaken for (or rather, just plain considered) good
behavior. The only girls who end up at Wediko and in other programs like it are those who manifest
their disturbances as most boys do; through aggression. Many of the more severely disturbed girls and
women fall through the proverbial cracks.
children in their educational setting as well as their residential and recreational setting. For a few of the students whom I saw in school as well as in the cabin and at the waterfront and in the dining room, I was able to provide yet another helpful connection between pieces of their lives at Wediko. For others, my unpredictable and apparently inconsistent schedule meant I wasn’t to be trusted. For young girls who have rarely encountered adults whom they can rely on to be where they’re supposed to be when they’re supposed to be there, it was difficult to forgive me for being there for them only some of the time. Many of them never got used to my coming and going.

Chaquia, a younger member of the cabin group with which I was affiliated, was one of my students for the first few weeks of the program. She was in her first year at Wediko, and all we knew about her was that she lived with her mother and her mother’s boyfriend, and was often responsible for helping take care of four younger siblings. The case worker was fairly certain the boyfriend was not the first unrelated resident to be physically abusive to the young family.

Chaquia came to school on the first day shy but enthusiastic about doing the work we offered her. She dove right into multiplication problems, and followed along as we read Faith Ringgold’s *Tar Beach* to the class. She seemed to be one of the few who was reading, writing and generally performing “on grade level,” which distinguished her from most of her developmental group.

By the beginning of the second week, however, Chaquia had withdrawn from us considerably and was refusing to do anything in school. She wouldn’t talk, she wouldn’t read, she wouldn’t write, and she wouldn’t do math. We were told that her behavior was typical of kids in her age group as they grew accustomed to the program; given the chance to express some of the anger and confusion she clearly had swirling around inside her she would more than likely regress to younger
ways. It often takes children all the energy they have to handle the emotion that swells in them when suddenly they realize they’re in a safe environment where people actually express anger and sadness. Chaquia had begun to growl and otherwise display a ferocious storm of energy outside of school, and her sudden apathy was clearly related to that display. She would only talk to other children in the group, resisting any conversation attempts made by members of the staff. The counselors on our clinical team were frustrated with her situation because in spite of the volatile behavior we saw in the others, we could usually help them “process” their behaviors by guiding them through a discussion about how they were feeling and how they might have let us know that using their words. Chaquia would only get more and more fierce as she grew more frustrated, but she couldn’t ever seem to tell us what was going on in her head. She couldn’t seem to tell us why she was growling, she couldn’t seem to tell us what made her so angry, and she certainly didn’t distinguish between being angry at something or someone and being angry at everything and everyone. When she was angry, she was angry, and that was all anyone needed to and could know.

As the summer progressed, Chaquia got angry more and more easily. We tried to make room for her anger while teaching her how to handle it herself and refrain from taking it out on others physically and verbally. Often we’d find ourselves encouraging Chaquia to yell at us about whatever was making her angry so that she could experience her anger and put it into words. She slowly began to find those words and then to use them to explain to us what was going on in her head and heart.

By the fifth week of the program, we knew Chaquia’s routine well. When something began to bother her, she would start to storm around the cabin, glaring at anyone who crossed her path. Depending on the nature of her upset, she might
then start to hurl accusations or insults at other kids or counselors. We would let Chaquia know her actions and words were making others feel unsafe, and remind her that unsafe behavior showed us she needed to spend some time away from the group until she could show us she was feeling safe again. By this point in the summer a warning of this sort was often enough to re-orient a child and help her begin to figure out why she was behaving unsafely. For Chaquia, it was a threat and more often than not escalated her behavior. Warnings gave her reason to direct her upset at the counselor who warned her. We had worked out an informal system of letting the counselor who'd had the easiest day (on a continuum from mildly trying to particularly traumatic) so far deal with her, because it seemed that we were just going through the motions for the sake of consistency. Nothing we had tried with Chaquia seemed to work.

One normal evening in that fifth week, when the girls were in the cabin getting ready for bed and setting their laundry out to be washed the next morning, Rachel, one of the other counselors, and I noticed that Chaquia was starting to pace around her corner. She appeared to be looking for something. Rachel volunteered. “Hey, Chaquia,” she called on her way over, “can I help you find something?”

Chaquia continued to pace without comment. Rachel stood beside her bed and offered again. “Is there something missing? Help me out here. Use your words.” Chaquia started to growl and her feet landed harder on the floor with each step. Rachel and I braced ourselves for a full-blown tantrum, when suddenly Chaquia stopped still in her tracks and looked hard at Rachel for several seconds, her own eyes brimming with anger.

“Yeah!” she yelled. “I can’t find my other shoe and I’m just–”

Rachel waited a few seconds, and then encouraged her. “You’re what? How does it feel? What is that called, Chaquia?”
Chaquia kicked the floor a couple of times, and pounded the air around her with her tiny clenched fists. “I’m so— I’m so— I’m so—”

“You can do it, Chaquia. Use your words.”

“I’m so—frustrated!”

“OK!” Rachel exclaimed. “Good for you. Be frustrated. Why are you frustrated?”

“Because I can’t find my shoe! I’m so frustrated!” I’ve never seen a person as thrilled as Rachel was to have someone yelling at full volume only six inches from their face, nonetheless encouraging the yelling.

“It must be frustrating to lose something. Can I help you find it?” For weeks we had struggled to find a way to help her identify her feelings and begin to think about their sources. She had finally found it in herself to recognize what the surge of emotion was, and where it came from. Rachel and I grinned as our own tears of relief and joy scurried down our faces. Rachel and Chaquia spent the next several minutes talking about how frustrating it was to lose a shoe, and eventually how it would have been hard for Rachel to know how Chaquia was feeling and why if she hadn’t told her. Whether or not this happened again before the end of the summer, whether or not she could internalize our encouragement when she found herself back in school, she had made a connection between her emotions and her language that she hadn’t been able to make when she arrived.

Traditional definitions of literacy leave little room for the likes of Chaquia, whose needs are far from met when she is considered literate because she reads and writes though she cannot make use of spoken language. The most interesting piece of her case is that she had acquired the reading and writing skills that constitute traditional definitions of “functional” literacy, where the reader/writer is able to perform everyday tasks related to print. For children with such extreme trouble
accessing language, reading and writing proficiency cannot guarantee functionality. Chaquia could not function in her home/school community without the ability to express herself verbally. Chaquia took an important step in developing a spoken literacy when she let us know that she was frustrated. In the safe, predictable context that was her routine and clinical team at Wediko, she made a connection between language and emotion that she hadn’t been able to make in the chaotic and unpredictable environment of her home.

I am assuming a definition of functional literacy, however, which is not generally accepted. While functional literacy is certainly an important piece of developing language proficiency and competency, it does not necessarily account for all aspects of literate functioning. Early descriptions of the “importance of literacy” touched only a piece of the functional literacy picture, such as this rationale for teaching reading skills in *Learning to Teach Reading in the Elementary School*, where the reader is distinguished from the non-reader by the ability to perform daily tasks involving print:

> Reading is required on a daily basis by all adults if they are to participate in modern-day society. Many everyday chores—completing tax forms, renewing a drivers’ license, and withdrawing money—require reading. In addition to using reading for such mundane tasks, this skill allows an individual to make informed choices. The television schedule will help him in planning his evening’s entertainment, the sale ads will help him in buying new furniture, and political announcements will aid in his choice of a candidate (p. 7).

This description of literacy reduces the use of language to a simple matter of manipulating words. While people do in fact need to be able to manipulate words to function on their own in society, more recent studies of functional literacy, and what kind of literacy skills and understandings people need to function in their environments, provide more thorough conceptions of what that functionality
means. For example, in *Growing up Literate*, Denny Taylor and Catherine Dorsey-Gaines refer to these instrumental and news-related uses of reading as only part of a larger functional picture. Their conception also includes "social-interactional" types of reading, where the reader is collecting and processing information about relationships; "recreational" types of reading; "critical-educational" reading, for handling any kind of learning related text; and "confirmational" reading which refers to any kind of historical information-gathering reading (pp. 131-155). This broader conception of what it means to be a functional reader takes more of the intricacies of real every day life into account than did earlier assumptions about functional literacy. Taylor and Dorsey Gaines recognize that, particularly in the communities they investigated, more reading goes on throughout a normal day than merely the instrumental and recreational sort. The authors begin to address some of the true meaning-making involved in functioning as a literate member of a community and society. For example, the social-interactional type of reading is illustrated by the reading and writing of letters by a girl named Tanya, who writes to her brother in jail:

Without easy access to a telephone and with no money to call, Tanya wrote letters to both [her brother and an old friend]. She also wrote to some of the men she had met when visiting her brother. "No one writes to them," she said. For Tanya, letters written meant letters to read. Her brother wrote to her, and so did her friend. She also received letters from the men serving time (p.131).

The authors' descriptions of and commentaries on the social-interactional use of reading in Tanya's community begin to address the kinds of expressive and meaning-making issues with which I am concerned. Part of their literacy is how they use their reading and writing skills to function in their communities. I believe, however that this notion of functional literacy is still incomplete without
the expressive piece; the acknowledgement of and attention to the connection between spoken language and emotional interaction with the world. An important piece of Tanya’s literacy is her ability to reflect as a reader and writer upon the meaning of her use of language. I believe that a crucial piece of Tanya’s literacy is her ability to recognize what she does as a reader, writer, speaker, and listener as a crucial piece of her functioning in her community and world.

Chaquia, for example, needed language to make sense of things, to begin to understand the likes of anger, frustration, and sadness more than to read the television guide. She was able to do the latter, and was thus considered a literate member of her home and school community but her inability to identify and deal with her emotions proved to be the difference between functioning successfully in that environment and not functioning successfully. Her example confirms my belief that this expressive piece of literacy, which allows a person to read the world and understand how her emotions and surroundings interact in that world, is as much a functional issue as the ability to interpret print.

Conclusions and Implications

My experience at Wediko led me extensive research and reflection about literacy as more than decoding and creating text. The focus of the program is to help children learn to use their words to express emotions. I was distressed by the division between school learning and life learning, which meant that literacy development was a matter of reading and writing, and that the children’s ability to express themselves was a matter of identifying and labeling their emotions. I began to see these experiences as part of the same process. Reading, writing, and speaking (and probably listening as well) should be equally important pieces of literacy development, defined as the process of understanding the world and one’s place in
that world. School learning and life learning should be one and the same, with matching goals of facilitating the development of comprehensive literacy. Schools and teachers should provide children with a language-rich environment in which they can gain experience with all prongs of literacy. When children appreciate themselves as members of a "literacy club," in which they are valuable and capable contributors to the world of language, they can begin to make connections not only between spoken and printed words but between thoughts or emotions and spoken and printed words.

Teachers can offer students such an opportunity by treating their students as real readers and writers and respecting them as speakers and listeners. Lucy Calkins, in *Living Between the Lines*, describes an approach to teaching reading and writing which includes verbal interaction as a crucial part of the development of strong reading and writing skills and appreciation. Calkins suggests that literature, interaction with published authors, research on that literature and those authors, and interactions with other readers and writers in the classroom helps children see language in its many modes as a way to make sense of their observations, memories, hopes and fears.

Calkins and her colleagues in the Columbia University Teachers' College Writing Project support the use of a number of different approaches to creating language-rich classroom environments which invite children to situate themselves in the world through language. The most well-known of these methods is the writing workshop, in which students rely on themselves and other students as much as on their teacher for feedback and assistance. Students learn to write for a number of different audiences and come to see the text they create as the whole language process that it is. They write, read, talk and listen around their text, developing and internalizing strategies for composing, revising, and editing as they
A more recent practical suggestion of the Teachers’ College Writing Project is that students participate in “book talks,” in which they address a particular theme or topic with a group of classmates, modeled around the type of conversations adults might have about a popular book or books. Again, the real literacy experience of reading and sharing the experience of reading through talking and listening is made available to students. These experiences can be structured by teachers but the course of the discussions and the choice of books can be left primarily up to the students to ensure that the experience is as genuine as possible.

Susan Lytle and Morton Botel, in *The Pennsylvania Framework for Reading, Writing, and Talking Across the Curriculum*, state that the goals for literacy in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania should not be limited to the time set aside in the school day for the so-called language arts of reading and writing. *The Framework* represents one of the larger recent efforts to recognize the many prongs of language development, including but by no means limited to reading, writing, listening, and speaking, as multi-faceted dynamic components of literacy development. These and other critical conceptions of literacy are slowly bringing about change in schools not only in Pennsylvania but throughout the United States, where literacy, or the absence of literacy, is a growing concern. Schools and teachers across the country are beginning to modify their approaches to facilitating literacy not only by finding and following new ideas about the teaching of literacy components but by thinking about the process as a complex one. This critical thinking, this recognition of the intricacies of the learning process, is what increases the chances that more children will emerge from school as literate young people.

My discussion of literacy as a multi-faceted process is hardly ground-breaking or exhaustive. Teachers, thinkers, writers, philosophers and many others have
continue to grapple with issues of literacy and the acquisition and development of language. By bringing together the likes of Maria’s model of literacy as an interactive, holistic, and constructive process and the notion that to become literate is to make sense of the world and one’s place in it, I have attempted to make a connection between the philosophical and the practical; the larger scope of literacy and what it means to be literate and the particular issues involved in becoming literate.

The implications for a more flexible and comprehensive definition of literacy are many. When educators recognize that literacy is a process of developing the ability to use all modes of language, writing, reading, speaking, and listening, in ways that allow the person to make meaning of and in their world, schools and teachers will begin to provide learning environments which cultivate this development.