ReWRITING the Basics

Literacy Learning in Children's Cultures

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Contents

Preface ix

Acknowledgments xiii

About the Author xvi

1. **The “Basics” and Society’s Children: Cases of Classroom Writing** 1

   On Metaphoric Mailboxes and Textual Playgrounds: Basic Critiques 4

   Neighborhood Drives: Places for Childhoods Past and Present 9

PART I: BASIC LESSONS AND BASIC TENSIONS

2. **Welcome to Writing Workshop** **25**

   The Classroom as Community: Working (and Playing) Together 26

   The Basics and the Official Writing Lives of Young Children 33

   Wide-Awake Children and Blinds-Shut Basics 41

3. **Looking Good and Sounding “Right”: Fix-Its** **43**

   Kindergarten Fix-Its: Where Do Written Stories Come From? 46

   1st-Grade Fix-Its: Whose Voice Is That? 59

The Basics in a Symbol-Mediated, Voice-Filled World 67

4. **The Ethics of Writing: On Truth and Ownership** **69**

"A Real Story About You" (The You That Is Not Spider-Man) 70

Your Own Story (The One That Is Not Copied) 75

Writing a Life Story (Or Writing in a Social Life?) 78

A Change in Angle of Vision 80

PART II: WRITING "BASICS" IN CHILDHOOD SPACES

5. **Shifting Expectations and Differing Ethics: Entering Childhood Cultures** **87**

Relational Fix-Its: "Put My Name in There!" 89

Organizing and Enacting Relationships: "Can I Play?" 94

A Caution About Developmental Order 97

6. **Collegial Relations and Coordinated Actions: Textual Handclaps** **99**

Written Language and the Mediation of Childhood Cultures 100

The Relational Landscape for Textual Play: Situating Old Basics in Child Spaces 111

7. **Complementary Relations and Improvisational Play: On Matters of Birthdays, Love, and War** **113**

Complementary Relations and Birthday Parties 115

Complementary Relations and Their Lack: The Complex Game of Love 122

From Complementary Relations to Collaborative Improvisations: The Pine Cone Wars 135

The Basic Dramas of Children's Textual Play 142

8. **Performers on a Movable Stage: On the Malleability of Voice and Image** **143**

Storytelling: Communicative Resources and Social Stages 145
Rhyming and Singing: New Written Venues for Play and Performance 157
On Child Performers 160

9. Re-Imagining Writing Basics for Contemporary Childhoods 162
Contextualizing the Basics 164
Toward a Re-Envisioned Basic Education 174
So, What Do You Think? 178

Appendix A. Reflections on Methods 180
Situating Teachers 180
Copying the Children 181
Constructing Analytic Narratives 183

Appendix B. Demographic Tables 185
Table B.1. Sex and Ethnicity of Mrs. Kay's Children 185
Table B.2. Sex and Ethnicity of Mrs. Bee's Children 186

References 187

Preface

The ABC's are supposed to be as easy as 1, 2, 3, as the Jackson 5 (1970) pointed out. Indeed, the ABC's of just about anything are the "basics"—the foundation for moving forward. In literacy education, the ABC's are taken quite literally. They come making sounds and bearing reams of rules about how they should be arranged on a page, decked out in CAPITAL or lowercase garb, phonologically linked in words, and grammatically laid out in sentences. Teeming with expectations for the proper learning child, there is nothing particularly easy about the ABC's.

Nor does their use, so to speak, necessarily make matters easier. Even in today's kindergartens and 1st grades, the subject of writing can be draped in a vocabulary all its own—young children are to "draft" and "revise," to "stretch words [to better hear their sounds]," indeed, to "stretch stories [to better fill the page]"; they must "sketch" (not "draw"), and "zoom in" to adorn their texts with "details." Their assumed aspirations are to be *real* writers, who shape individual experience on paper.

So it was in Mrs. Bee's kindergarten and Mrs. Kay's 1st grade (all names in this book are pseudonyms, except for those of certain kindergartners for whom I received permission to use their first names). As in many public school classrooms in city schools, the basics were considered especially important, because their students were deemed "at risk" of school failure—that is, they were from economically distressed neighborhoods and, also, disproportionately children of color. For children so designated, the earlier the basics are taught, the better, or so it is thought (Lonigan & Shanahan, 2010). In Mrs. Bee's and Mrs. Kay's rooms, the expected basics were clearly detailed, the language arts curricula mandated, individual progress regularly tested.

In the pages to come, the assumed basics are not dismissed, nor are the efforts of dedicated teachers like Mrs. Bee and Mrs. Kay. In fact, I complicate the basics, examining the values and beliefs—the ideologies—they embody about proper language and proper children. I ask, in a world—and among children—whose rhythms beat out in varied languages and vernaculars, whose landscapes are strewn with multimodal and rhetorically designed texts (e.g., *PiZZA, saveBIG*), is it sensible, or clarifying, to treat written language as a static set of rules?

Still, the goings-on in Mrs. Bee's and Mrs. Kay's classrooms had to do with more than official expectations. There were unofficial ones too, grounded in children's worlds. And in these worlds, individual achievement and singular selves were not the motivational fuel for writing time. As the curriculum marched each child forward to a benchmarked beat, children could take what the school had to offer—its times and spaces, its materials, and its symbolic resources—and construct more collective encounters with print. As those Jackson 5 lyrics rhymed out, you got to "spell me, you" and then "add the two." That is, written language is rooted in human relationships.

For example, even if they did not know "how to make the words," kindergartners could "play . . . on paper," as 5-year-old Willo said; they could draw themselves side by side and even write their names so close together their letters seemed to be holding hands. The more experienced 1st-graders could coordinate their composing to enact some jointly improvised event—a plan for a fun-filled birthday, a battle in outer space, or, more humbly, a joint trip to the grocery store or, maybe, the circus.

Composing time could yield new kinds of playgrounds and new kinds of childhood practices. Childhood relations and practices potentially made writing relevant—and easier if not easy; such relevance is necessary if children are to learn, not just the subject of writing, but a cultural tool for participation (Vygotsky, 1978).

Children's attunement to one another and the social ability to adapt relevant symbolic material, coordinate their actions, assume complementary roles, and thereby jointly construct a textual place are key to extending and re-imagining the basics, the fundamental work of this book. To capture the basic transformation I am after here, I turn to an excerpt from the novelist Andrea Levy's book *Small Island* (2004). In this scene, Queenie is searching for a metaphor to capture the essence of her father-in-law, Arthur. She finds one in an old basic, as it were:

> Early Bird, my teacher at Bolsbrooke Elementary School, taught us all in English grammar that an apostrophe is a mark to show where something is missing. And that was how I'd always seen Bernard's father, Arthur: a human apostrophe. He was there but only to show us that something precious had gone astray. (p. 238)

In that evocative passage, Levy moves from a graphic matter to a relational one, from a sound, a letter gone missing, to some fundamental responsiveness, some *there* there, gone astray. In a modest way, that is what I am attempting to do in this book. I aim to move from an individualistic conception of childhood-writing basics to one better suited to the sociability—the humanity—of our children, the diversity of their resources (including language), the multimodality of their play, and the malleability of this nimble medium, written language.

I begin in Chapter 1 by introducing both key concepts and key players in this book. The concepts have to do with our fundamental beliefs about—our ideologies of—childhoods and language; these fuel "basic" instruction. I introduce those key players by taking readers on a discursive drive with me through Mrs. Kay's school neighborhood and then Mrs. Bee's. I end each drive at the schoolhouse, pointing out to readers the teachers and the children who we will soon see grappling with the basics.

As the book unfolds, the textual spotlight will center on official worlds and traditional basics in Part I (Chapters 2–4). The spotlight will intermittently move to the children's unofficial worlds before settling there in Part II (Chapters 5–8). It will be important not to romanticize those worlds or to dismiss children's need for guidance from their caring teachers. But it will also be important to take the children seriously. It is, after all, their childhoods they are writing out, the foundation for their sense of themselves as intelligent, active agents in a world composed with others.

Finally, in Chapter 9, I provide a summary of the re-imagined basics and consider what they mean for day-to-day teaching and learning. The pedagogic goal is to take those ABC's and situate them in the social and intellectual lives of the very young.