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The interpretation of the signs of another's text (e.g., reading, being read to, looking at pictures) is also the construction of signs. Previously, I pointed out how the children's reactions (i.e., their construction of new signs) varied in response to the picture book. Children are not simply decoding some objective meaning when confronting an existing text, but are always in the process of translating and connecting the text to their own experiences as a way of making sense of the narrative and the world. In the example of the two girls participating in the group activity following a visit to a pizza restaurant, each took the original narrative and crafted new and very original signs with their own unique narratives.

Crafting new signs, whether through the direct construction of text or through the interpretation of another's text, provides children with a developing sophistication of written language. They are learning that the signs they create are not haphazard or random but hold a particular logic and that the motivated link between meaning and form is maintained as they move into alphabetic text. Meaning remains the integral element, and form is the means of expression. Marks that are closely connected contain meaning, and there is a formal organization (i.e., linkages and lines of text) that allows for the organization of meaning. Children experience written language as having particular *spatial qualities, layout, and directionality*. They also encounter it as *linear*, as elements in *sequence*, as sequenced elements that are *connected*, as elements made up of *simple shapes*, and as elements that are *repeatable*. There appears to be no rooted or native hierarchy here. Children in inclusive, literate communities are exposed to these complexities, actively engage in them, and begin to construct meaning from them in different patterns, at different rates, and according to individualized literate profiles. Although literacy may appear similar across children, no two children ever follow the same path or pattern.

Beginning with Words of Intense Meaning

Children's earliest efforts at making sense of the complexities of print tend to be around signs of particular significance and meaning. Children learn that meaning and form are maintained in alphabetic signs. Often the child's printed name is one word that is central to the child's identity and is made visually available in the early childhood environment with commentary from surrounding adults.

Early in the school year, just prior to his fourth birthday, I observed Sam, a typically developing child, sign his name. He made a line with several curves considered by his

teachers to represent an S. He told an adult, "This is Sam. This is me! I drew my name." Sam had come at that moment to symbolically embody a sense of self in the beginning letter of his name. In addition, he had spent an extraordinary amount of time developing the curves of the S. If I had not been observing, I would have assumed he had made the line quickly and fairly randomly. However, I had been witness to the intellectual intensity that he poured into the effort. Clearly the shape was of central concern, even though it bore only minimal similarity to what I consider a normal S.

Some of Sam's peers were also demonstrating interest in letter formation to express narratives. Some focused their creative efforts on the linear quality of lines of text; others grouped markings together in a way that looked like single words but were at times read as sentences. Still others seemed to be, similar to Sam, interested in the intricacies of certain letter shapes. No two children were exactly alike. Each was developing a unique literate profile.

It might be inferred that Sam's drawn S has no inherent representational qualities of Sam and is thus an arbitrary symbol randomly attached to the beginning phoneme of his name. Such a frame of mind might lead to the conclusion that drill and rote memorization are rational approaches to literacy and that Sam will *get better* at literacy as he grows. In contrast, the vital point is that Sam did not approach his written name as arbitrary, but rather he had come to purposefully, emotionally, and intellectually embody the symbols in an extraordinarily motivated manner. This process clearly began long before any formal literacy program was imposed. The S was the whole of Sam. At this point he was not drawing sound, but, instead, he was drawing meaning using certain letters to represent not particular phonemes but the essence of his representation.

To better understand Sam's literate S, recall that the refrigerator box does not actually look like a complete rocket, but young children in particular communities come to see certain critical features of the box as being rocket enough to represent a vessel for space flight. This does not occur apart from cultural, social, or adult influence; however, we tend to see children's creation of this metaphor as both logical and innate. We do not have drills or workbooks related to boxes becoming modes of transportation. Similarly, our heads do not physically look like circles, but long before they enter formal schooling young children quickly come to use circles to depict heads in their drawings. In so doing they are creating a metaphor—"This shape will serve as a 'head.' It is headlike enough to convey my idea within my community."

Likewise, the emotion of joy is an internal feeling, but children give it symbolic shape in movements that adults often refer to as dance. Although dance may not look like the internal feeling of joy, it becomes its symbolic expression and thus gives joy a

visible sign. Many very young children recognize the symbol of the *Golden Arches*, an ideogram, as representative of the McDonalds restaurant. In the same fashion, Sam's written name had come to depict him. He had come to associate critical features of himself with the written word *S-A-M*. The shape of the symbolized name (its form) contained the critical features Sam was seeking in how he metaphorically represented who he was to a surrounding world—a world, as Sam had come to realize, that embodied a great deal of meaning and importance in the simple, clustered, repeated shapes that make up written language. There exists no evidence that a child's initial forays into print are more intellectually taxing or more unnatural than the efforts to create signs from boxes, drawn figures, or dance. In each of a child's multiple sign systems, what appears necessary for developing sophistication is the presence of local understanding that allows for active symbolic participation and that takes seriously children's individual motivations in a responsive, literacy-rich context.

Initially, Sam's focus was on the beginning mark—*S*—and it mattered tremendously to him how the line curved. Not just any curved line would serve. Soon teachers would begin directing Sam in how to curve his line for an appropriate *S*, and as the mechanics of conformity take precedence, any understanding of the intellectual and emotional energy Sam once poured into his own sense of the curves will be lost. In his early efforts, if the *S* was not drawn specifically for his name, either by Sam or a teacher, Sam appeared not to associate the mark with a representation of himself. For instance, I observed a teacher's aide point to the *S* in the word *stop* and say to Sam, "Hey, *S* for *stop*, and *S* for Sam." Sam looked blankly at the word for a second and then said, "That's not me," and scooted off. At this point, Sam's sense of letters was still rigidly context specific. He was still *drawing words* rather than *drawing sounds*.

Although I argue that signs always remain contextually bound, we do develop the capacity to wrench a letter from one situation and carry it over to a new situation in order to construct meaning (and, of course, a new context for that letter). Conventional views of literacy suggest that printed language is inherently abstract and, therefore, can be moved from place to place and reconfigured as needed. Unfortunately, this view translates to how we teach young children about print. We begin with drills that are highly abstract and indeed purposefully stripped of meaning while ignoring that literacy begins and in many ways remains for the child a context bound endeavor. In a sense, the child is always saying, "How does this help me construct meaning right now?"

Four months after my initial observation, I again saw Sam sign his name. This time he was much quicker, and his signature involved three marks in a row from left to right. The first sign looked something like an *S* but it was not as intricately done as in my preceding observation. Sam was clearly developing a sense of linkage, sequence, linearity, and so forth. He was paying close attention to the number of marks clustered

to form his name. Other children were commenting on the length of words, and to Sam's distress a degree of status had been bestowed on children with more marks making up their names.

I continued to observe Sam's printed efforts throughout the school year as well as the following school year when he was 4 years old, soon to be 5. There were moments when he spent a great deal of time writing his name in extremely clear fashion and other times when he reverted to a single mark. On other occasions, he wrote his name from right to left or with two letters instead of three. I also saw Sam sweep his finger across his name, sounding it out in slow fashion to suggest that he was learning that the graphemes he constructed represented words that could be spoken. Although there was a clear progression evident in his efforts, Sam demonstrated what I came to regard as a fairly typical nonlinear quality to literate development.

During an observation when Sam was nearly 5 years old, he walked over to me and said, "I need help." His intention was to create a sign for home that would keep his older siblings (i.e., "big kids" in Sam's parlance) out of his bedroom but allow his same-age friends (i.e., just "kids") to enter. "How do you write *kids allowed*?" he wanted to know.

I said, "It starts with *K*. You spell it *K-I-D-S*." Sam wrote the letters as I repeated them.

After he wrote the *K*, he asked, "Is this how you make a *K*?" He turned the paper toward me so that I was looking at it right side up. When he completed the word, he again turned the paper toward me and said, "Look," pointing to his zigzag-shaped *S*, "I made that *Sevil*!" He laughed. I assumed then that his shape was accidental, and he ascribed meaning after the fact, but on the sign he drew a picture of "big kids" making their mouths in the exact shape of the *S*. "Look at!" he exclaimed. "They are evil." I never did learn why he thought of that shape as representative of evil, or what incident inspired the sign, but the interaction reminded me that it is important to be open to the possibility of intent in the actions of young children.