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The myths of reading aloud

Although I've been teaching literacy education courses for twenty years and I should probably develop some new tricks, I begin each semester with the same statement. "The first rule of teaching literacy is to read to your kids." For those few who aren't prepared to hear my pearls of wisdom so early in the semester, I repeat, "The first rule is to read to your kids, and you should write that down in capital letters in your nice clean notebooks." I'm not sure if I care that the NICHD hasn't bothered to study the effects of reading aloud to kids on students' achievement. I just plow on in that first class to read **The Paperbag Princess**. I start with that book because it entertains my students, demonstrating that I am not as boring as I look, shows them that there will be some surprises in the course, and sets up discussions to take place in some later classes. That is to say, I have selected that book to begin my classes because it matched my intentions for the occasion and sent messages that I hope would be received.

I assume that others - those who know the first rule of teaching literacy - follow similar reasoning for the books they select to read to others on special occasions. During the last decade when literacy learning has been a national priority, many very important people have ventured into public spaces to read from children's books, demonstrating their commitment to American education and children. Many times cameras have been available to catch these VIPs doing a good deed. In those photographs printed in the newspapers and the film clips that appear on the news, we not only catch a glimpse of the leaders' compassion, but we receive a sign of what they value, who they value, and how they hope we will live together based on the texts they chose to read. In what follows, I explore the reasoning

behind book selection for special occasions, demonstrate the seriousness of the representations in children's books, and interpret the books that three of our nation's leaders have read in public. I'll end with a brief discussion of two books that I hope some leader will read aloud to children and the nation in the near future.

WHICH BOOK TO PICK?

For those who don't know **The Paperbag Princess**, it is Robert Munsch's tale of Princess Elizabeth who outwits a dragon in order to save Prince Ronald. A subplot to the new style of dragon slaying is the demise of Elizabeth's and Ronald's engagement. At the end of the story, Ronald cannot overcome his princely discourse in order to accept Elizabeth, the now messy hero dressed in a paper bag, and the new Elizabeth cannot return to her role as Ronald's arm-candy. Beyond the humor and the surprise, I select this book each semester in order to provide my students with common characters to use when we attempt to understand James Gee's notions of discourse. Thinking about Liz, Ron and the dragon as representations of specific discourses make it much easier for my students to understand just what Gee means when he states that individuals do not speak for themselves, rather discourses speak through individuals.

You see, Ronald can't help it if he's an ungrateful snob and the dragon can't help it if he burns castles and clothes because each is following the values of his primary discourse groups - royalty and monster discourses respectively. (The women in my literacy classes are certain that the dragon is male because Elizabeth defeats the dragon by flattering his physical prowess.) Only Elizabeth can change at the end of the story because she has now joined a secondary discourse group (dragon

slayers) enabling her to critique her primary discourse (royalty). She displays the values of her new discourse group when she calls Ronald a bum for placing too much emphasis on appearances.

Reading **The Paperbag Princess** to my class that first day represents the world as I hope it will become. The story demonstrates courage in the face of adversity, non-violent resistance to violence, and equality among genders. Moreover, Elizabeth's ability to name the social structures, which contradict the rhetoric of freedom, demonstrates a path toward continuous human development through the discourses we acquire. All of these values are embedded in the definition of literacy and life that I want to put before these preservice teachers who

will soon be representing the world to their students. I selected the book because it works for my audience and for me.

WHAT'S IN THE BOOKS?

I know what you're thinking right now. Shannon's a nutball. He twists this perfectly lovely children's story into some political diatribe that the author never intended. He does so because it serves his own agenda. Nutball I may be, but children's books do carry such messages and authors have at least some understanding of this fact when they write. They do intend to represent reality for their readers. Consider the statements of celebrated children's authors during interviews with Jonathan Cott (1983):

I'm subversive as hell. ...The Cat in the Hat is a revolt against authority. ...It's revolutionary in that it goes as far as Kerensky, and then, stops. It doesn't go quite as far as Lenin.

(Dr. Seuss as quoted in Cott, 28)

Adults will take their kids to museums to see a lot of peckers in a row on Roman statues and say: "That's art, dearie," and then, come home and burn In the Night Kitchen. Where's the logic in that? Art in people's minds is desexualized and that would make the great artists sick,

(Maurice Sendak as quoted in Cott, 55)

When I wrote Dominic I didn't mean it to be about anything. ... I have a position, a point of view, but I don't have to think about it to express it. I write about anything and my view will come out. So when I am at work, my conscious effort is to tell a story to the readers. All this other stuff takes place automatically.

(William Steig as quoted in Cott, 104-105)

Each of these authors states that they do consider sophisticated matters in their children's books. Sometimes they make a conscious effort to promote their values or their slant on the world, and other times, their values and outlook accompany their stories without explicit intention. As Steig says, the ideas and values are always in the books because "this stuff takes place automatically."

But then again, I do bring my values to the books that I read as well. We all do. It's part of reading, eh? My students and I could begin a discussion of **The Paperbag Princess** (or any other children's text) with a description of what we saw, heard, and read. Although we may quibble about details in our descriptions, we typically would come to quick agreement about what Barthes calls the denotative level of meaning. We are all apt retellers of the stories we read and hear. We would be much less agreeable, however, when we begin to use our beliefs, experiences, and values to interpret the children's book we just described. Interpreting text - assigning connotative meaning as Barthes labels it - would push our discussion into broader semantic fields than is necessary for description. As we express our interpretations, we would demonstrate our cultural, economic, social, and political diversity within our class. None of us would have the truth about the meaning of the book - not even the author - because the meaning is in the reading and the reading is directed by our values. And as **The Paperbag Princess** so aptly demonstrates, we share those values with other members of our discourse groups.

When selecting a book to read aloud on a special occasion, would-be readers must consider both sets of values - the ones embedded in the author's representations of reality and the ones that they assign to the text while reading. Under these conditions, the reader must make decisions about how they want to represent their worldview in public because the book, itself, becomes a sign of the reader's vision of and hope for the future. Within the practice of selecting and reading children's texts in public, the reader becomes an author of sorts. The reader projects his or her own meaning for the book at that time and place and represents the past, present and future to listeners. As reader/authors, they may be like Dr. Seuss, completely aware of that meaning or like William Steig, letting it "take place automatically." In cases when national leaders serve as readers, the potential listening group can be large indeed.

BILL CLINTON READS

Take for example President Clinton's selection of **The Little Engine that Could** in order to announce his *America Reads* program during his 1996 presidential campaign. President Clinton didn't read the book himself on this occasion, but he and his campaign managers selected the text for two third grade students to read on the steps of the Wyandotte, Michigan library. The book and the two students were to represent the message that Clinton intended to send to the nation as he made his way by train from the White House to the Democratic Convention in Chicago. The readers were signs of the success of some American schools with some American children. They had accomplished the putative goal of the *America Reads* program - they were able to read a book independently by the end of second grade. The President used the children to represent part of his vision for the future. "That is what we have to have - A Justin and an Elizabeth in every single home in the United States of America."

But there was more to Clinton's vision of the future, and **The Little Engine That Could** carried some of that load to his audience. At a denotative level, Watty Piper's 1949 story is about a train of toys and food destined for the children on the other side of the mountain. When the original engine fails, the toys ask other able engines if they will help them reach their destination for the sake of the children. After several engines refuse to give aid, a little blue engine agrees to help and succeeds solely by force of will. "I think I can. I think I can, I think I can." The reprinted original version of the book, which Justin and Elizabeth read, has two to four lines of predictable and patterned language on each page with washed-out four color rectangular illustrations at the top of each page. **The Little Engine That Could** is considered a classic children's book.

In Clinton's hands, this classic represents the world from his neoliberal perspective. Using the engines as metaphors for important groups in America, the story offers Clinton's view that too many Americans are not ready, willing and able to supply the work needed for flexible production in a global economy. You see the first engine that refused to help is too proud of its past, the second engine is too important in its present, and the third engine is too tired or lazy to do the job of carrying goods to the children on the other side of the mountain. They are willing to leave the clients unsatisfied. By analogy, **The Little Engine That Could**

depicts large corporations, protected industries, and old, undereducated, and dirty workers as threats to our society because they live according to out-of-date assumptions about the world and their places in it. Only a new breed of willing entrepreneurs – little engines who think they can – are able to save us. These little-engines-that-can will do so with minimal need for public support. The trains will run on time privately after indirect public support for the construction of these engines (the proposed *America Reads* program). With two children reading this book, Clinton presents a strong sign to represent his values for America.

LAURA BUSH READS

During the campaign for President of the United States in 2000, Laura Bush traveled across the country representing her husband's message. At that time, newspaper columnists often wrote of Mrs. Bush's shyness in political meetings and wondered if she were equal to the task of first lady. Other reports of her campaigning expressed the joy she displayed in visiting schools and libraries in many locations. Perhaps, it was her experiences as a school librarian that eased the stress of campaigning. Upon many of these visits, she read a Caldecott Award winning picture book, **Officer Buckle and Gloria**, to children, teachers, and the press.

Peggy Rathmann's book presents a story of police officer Buckle who has been assigned to conduct lectures on safety in elementary schools. Although he is creative in identifying safety tips (e.g. #77 NEVER stand on a SWIVEL CHAIR"), his presentations put elementary school students to sleep. Even the adults in schools ignore his tips. On one trip to the elementary school, Officer Buckle brought the police dog, Gloria, as company. While he gave his safety speech, Gloria mimicked his actions from behind. The children enjoyed Gloria's performance, and Officer Buckle began to receive requests for his safety lectures all over town. Each request encouraged him to bring Gloria. As the team's fame increased, Officer Buckle becomes aware that it is Gloria and not his tips that are attracting people's attention. He stops giving lectures until disaster strikes the school population, and the principal and children ask for his help. Officer Buckle agrees that Gloria and he make a good team and adds another safety tip ("# 101: ALWAYS STICK WITH YOUR BUDDY!"). The simple pen and ink drawings painted in bright colors with varying amounts and placements of text on the page keep

readers and listeners attentive.

When read by Mrs. Bush in schools however, the book says much more than stick with your buddy. When considered as a representation of conservative politics, the book suggests that the world is a perilous place with dangers lurking around every corner. If we do not prepare to protect ourselves, then it is likely that our world will come apart. Precautions require directives from government sources and sacrifice of personal control over our lives. When serious men knowledgeable enough to see these dangers attempt to deliver this message, the general population finds them uninteresting and abstract (Think Barry Goldwater in the 1960s, Alexander Haig during the late 1970s, and Jesse Helms any time). Yet when the message is delivered with humor and clowning, it can lead to the election of Ronald Reagan and perhaps another governor from a Western state. Yes, that would make Dick Cheney Officer Buckle.

GEORGE W. BUSH READS

During George W. Bush's campaign for the Presidency of the United States, a reporter asked him to name his favorite childhood book. Perhaps the correspondent thought that the reply would give Americans some insight into Bush's character and some measure of his interests. He answered, "**The Very Hungry Caterpillar**". The press had a field day with that response because Carle's book was published originally in 1969 when Bush was attending Yale University. The jokes ranged from the dumbing down of Yale's curriculum to Bush's extended childhood. It could be, however, that President Bush heard the question incorrectly and was simply naming the book that he enjoyed most while reading to his children when they were young. Regardless of his reason for mentioning that book, he's read **The Very Hungry Caterpillar** in elementary schools across the country – even when journalists characterized his audiences as too old to enjoy it.

The Very Hungry Caterpillar presents the life cycle of a butterfly in story form. Eric Carle's artwork is bright and inventive as he uses cut paper, tiny holes, and clipped pages to mix factual information with the story of a caterpillar eating his way from the larva stage until he is big and strong enough to spin a cocoon in order to become a butterfly. Along with this science lesson, Carle offers a counting book from one to five as the caterpillar eats differing amounts of fruit each day of the week (which are named in order). There's even

a morality play concerning good eating habits – Saturday’s junk food binge results in a stomachache and the need for green leafy vegetables on Sunday to settle his stomach. I’m afraid that I’m not doing the book justice. It’s cute and imaginative, and our children loved it when they were preschoolers.

President Bush offers a different lesson when he reads **The Very Hungry Caterpillar** to school children and the press – one of acquisition or perhaps consumption is a better label. His reading suggests that uninterrupted accumulation of things without regard for others will be rewarded with great, even profound, personal gain. Gone are the illusions of Clinton’s little engine entrepreneur who meets the needs of community in order to get rich by doing good. Here we have an individual getting fat by taking what he needs from the environment. Each day the caterpillar acquires more, eating a hole in more and more fruit and leaving the rest to ruin. Over-indulgence requires only a tonic, and then, the overwhelming quantity of accumulations results in a qualitative change of being. That is, the accumulator becomes one of the beautiful, free to fly wherever without apparent need or care. Moreover this metamorphosis is completely natural as the accumulator is entitled to all that he takes and gets. Sounds like anyone you know?

MYTH

Lest we forget, the first rule of teaching literacy is reading aloud to your kids. When VIPs read aloud to children and the media, we typically get more than a demonstration of fluent reading, a good story, and a lesson on how to handle a book. Rather they present their interpretations of the world as if they are true, natural, and final. Barthes calls this process, “myth.” For example, in **The Little Engine That Could**, the little blue engine is associated with voluntary service, leaving readers with the idea that they might also serve others. In Clinton’s reading of that text, that idea becomes associated with saving America from economic ruin, leaving listeners with the idea that citizens (not business or government) should address and solve the economic and social problems facing America. Here the original sign has become emptied, robbed of its meaning. And the myth of personal responsibility for America’s problems has been left in its place. President and Mrs. Bush offer other myths for us to ponder, ones that pull us in somewhat different directions than Clinton and even each other.

We can learn about these myths and their effects on us (clearly Clinton’s myth figured into his educational plan, his ending of welfare as we know it, and his unwillingness to promote national childcare) by learning to read the entire text of a VIP reading aloud in public. And politicians aren’t the only ones to use myth in this way (ask me about Shaq reading **The Cat in the Hat**): advertisers use it constantly to get us to consume their customers’ goods. That’s another reason why I begin with **The Paperbag Princess**. It enables me to talk about denotation, connotation, and myth as part of reading print and other signs in the world around my students. My intention is to encourage them to help their students to realize these facts about text and literacy. Educating the young and old is a long term response.

In the short run, I’m introducing some myths more aligned with my vision of what the world should be. Today (10/31/01) when Americans are waving flags and dropping bombs on Afghanistan in order to counteract terrorism, I’ll start my class by reading Florence Heide and Judith Gilliland’s **Sami and the Time of the Troubles**, which presents the story of a Middle Eastern family confined to the basement of their house while bombs fall in and around their city. Ted Lewin’s watercolors are exquisite and convey the psychological and emotional damage inflicted on this family. The story ends with citizens recognizing the futility of violence to combat violence. And because election day is just around the corner, I’ll end class reading a section from Septima Clark’s personal narrative, **Ready From Within**, about the citizenship schools she helped to establish in the 1950s in order to teach disenfranchised Black citizens to read and vote in local and national elections. Clark’s voice alone is enough to inspire my students to teach others how to use the butterfly ballots still in many election booths in rural communities around our town. My dream, of course, is that Colin Powell will take **Sami and the Time of the Troubles** and Anthony Scalia will choose **Ready From Within** to read aloud when visiting elementary schools in the near future. But I’m not holding my breath while I dream.

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