23 A World Without Print

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This is the story of Jenny and Donny, a mother and son who are trying to learn to read and write. They live in a midwestern city in the United States of America. The city is relatively prosperous, and so are many of its residents. A major state university is situated there. . . .

There is, of course, an urban poor population in this city as in all cities. It is largely made up of two ethnic minorities—African Americans and urban Appalachians, blacks and whites. Jenny and Donny are urban Appalachian. They and Big Donny and Timmy live in the central city, for the most part segregated from their African American peers. They do not live in the worst of the ghettos, a twelve-square-block nest of grinding poverty, crime, sickness, and despair. Rather, they live at the bottom of the hill upon which the university reigns, just across the interstate that separates them from densely populated Camp Fairwell, the urban Appalachian ghetto in which Jenny grew up and where her brother and other relatives still live. Camp Fairwell is close enough for her to walk—under the overpass and she's there in twenty minutes—to use the phone when hers is cut off and the family's cars are inoperable.

Donny attends one of the city schools, just as his mother and father did before him. The school is integrated, with both African American and urban Appalachian children. He had attended one year of Head Start, at another location, and then one year of first grade. Kindergarten is not required in this city, although most children do attend. Donny did not, however, because Jenny did not know about it. Because she cannot read, she has to rely on friends to tell her about things like this, and no one told her about kindergarten.

At the beginning of his second-grade year, Donny could not read or write anything but his first name and, occasionally when prompted, the word *the*. When asked to read a nearly memorized text, he runs his finger under whole lines of print while "reading" one or two words. He is still unsure about one-third of the letters in the alphabet, reverses his b's and d's, and has such an aversion to reading that he will cover his eyes and exclaim, "No, no! No words for me!"

Aside from this, he is a bright, mischievous, artistically talented young boy. Polite and deferential, he is filled with ideas and his eyes gleam with humor. He loves to make things and can utilize any material—paper, string, wood, glue, glitter—in his spontaneous creations. He also loves stories, both oral ones and those read to him from books. He adores his father, loves his mother, and is careful to take care of his brother Timmy, as a big brother must. He speaks with a soft Appalachian drawl and draws upon this lively dialect to enhance his many recollections and stories.

Jenny dropped out of school in the seventh grade—as did Big Donny, after repeating it three times. She reports that neither she nor Big Donny "can read a lick." About half of their friends, relatives, and neighbors are also unable to read, according to her. She wants to learn to read well enough to be able to help Donny with his school work. She knows he cannot read any words and is angry that the school passed him on to second grade. She is frustrated that he brings home homework which he cannot do and with which she cannot help him. The five spelling words Donny's teacher sends home each week with a different activity each day ("arrange alphabetically," "put each word in a sentence," and so on) are beyond her. The list contains words like *bug* and *sun*. Not only can she not read the spelling words; she cannot read the directions from the teacher—"arrange alphabetically"—and Donny seems unable to help. Although she has "plainly told" the teacher that neither she nor Big Donny can read, the school continues to send written work home and to penalize Donny for not doing it or for doing it incorrectly. Eventually Jenny found her way up the hill to the university where I work. . . .

Thus I first met Jenny in my office at the university. Long straight brownish blond hair hung lankly to her shoulders, and her faded blue eyes looked straight at me with determination. Jenny told me that while Big Donny preferred to accept his nonliteracy, she wanted to learn to read and had begun attending a neighborhood-based adult education center. She wanted to be able to read children's books to her kids. She also wanted to be able to shop in new places without asking friends to come along to read labels and signs for her.

"It's hard not knowin' how to read. Some people think it's easy . . . just sit down and do it. But it ain't."

Jenny was particularly concerned about the effect of her nonliteracy on Donny's ability to learn to read and write in school. This drove her to find her way to the university-based Literacy Center, which I directed, to seek help. She knew that the Center only served children in grades 1–12, but she asked if there was any way she could "sit alongside" her son as we taught

From *Other People's Words: The Cycle of Low Literacy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997. 10–15, 40–65.

him. I suggested the following arrangement: I would work with Donny and her personally (graduate students were the primary teachers in the Center). In return, I asked her permission to record our work together so that I might study how she and her son learned to read and write. She agreed, and we began our two-year association. . . .

Current theory posits that young children do not wait to begin to learn to read and write until they start school. Rather, they begin to learn about reading and writing from birth, in their homes and communities, as they observe others using print for various real life purposes and as they begin to "join in" these activities and experiment with their own forms of reading and writing. Thus we often see children of preschool age asking about store signs ("What does that say?"), claiming they can "read" a label or a favorite book, "drawing" their names, and approaching grown-ups with pieces of paper on which they have made marks with the query, "What did I write?"[1] Parents report that they have even overheard older babies and young toddlers in their cribs, babbling in clear "reading" intonation as they turn the pages of little cloth books.

Learning and exploration do not take place in a vacuum, however. We are able to learn only what we can experience. Language learning, in particular, requires both the existence of language in the environment and the opportunity to interact with language users so that one can work it out—sort out the pragmatic and syntactic rules, learn the vocabulary, and perfect the "sounds" of the language.[2] Emergent literacy researchers and theorists claim that, as children learn oral language through experience and interaction with speech, so do young children learn about print—about written language—as they grow and develop in a literate society such as ours. Much of my own research has been within this paradigm, and I have sought ways to document what it is, linguistically and cognitively, that young children learn about print before school and the ways in which this knowledge affects their success at beginning formal instruction in reading and writing.

When Jenny "plainly told" me that neither she nor Big Donny could read or write, I was anxious to confirm this. If neither Jenny nor Big Donny could read or write *anything* (beyond their names), what place did print have in their home? What were Donny and Timmy learning—or not learning—about written language? This family presented a rare opportunity—in a society such as ours, where print is so pervasive—to explore the role that experiences with print do and do not play in young children's development as literate beings.

Researchers who focus on emergent literacy have stated unequivocally that all children growing up in a literate society learn many important concepts about written language before they begin school. As an emergent literacy researcher, I sought to explore the particulars of this statement. Do all children learn the same concepts, in the same way(s), to the same extent?[3]

Written Language Is Different from Oral

To grasp the significance of the emergent literacy research, one must understand a basic tenet: written language is not simply oral language written down. We do not learn to read and write speech. We learn to read and write written text. Close linguistic study has revealed what most of us intuit. Written language is different from oral language. Related, but different.[4]

These differences can be appreciated if one transcribes true speech; not speech that is *written* to be speech but speech as it occurs. Here is a sample I captured at the breakfast table one morning as my husband and I ate.[5]

Speaker 1	*Speaker 2*
Today's Monday. . . . Well . . . at least if I get this done . . . today, . . . as long as I . . . if I don't have to match . . . to the sides . . . that really shouldn't make any difference . . . the way they . . . fiddle with the . . . here . . . . what color . . . would you like the . . . shelves . . . painted?	right . . . right
they're kind of white /??/	Uh. . . . pr'bly the . . . uh . . . the "antique white" . . .
do we have it? where is it	let's use that Yeah. . . .
is there a lot?	we do. . . . 'cause you brought it up here one time. remember? I don't know . . . you'll have to check

True speech is so hard to "write" that rendering a faithful transcript is extremely difficult. The tendency is to "hear" the language as it would be written, without the hesitations, fragmentations, repetitions, and so on. Written speech is also extremely hard to "read." One cannot "follow" it; comprehension is difficult. The typical reaction to the task is "You had to be there." And this is true, because speech, or oral language, is used in situations in which both communicative partners are present. They can see each other, read the other's body language, hear the intonation of the speech stream, question and challenge, ask for clarification. Oral language is employed within a shared physical context.

Written language is the opposite. It is used under the assumption that the two communicants—the writer and the reader—will not share the same physical space when the writing is read. The simple truth of this pragmatic

statement is revealed whenever we find ourselves in the uncomfortable position of "listening" to a piece of writing being read, such as at a professional conference or at a meeting. Members of an audience tend to "fade out" whenever a speaker begins to read a paper to them; it is too hard to "follow"; comprehension is difficult. We want the speaker to "speak," to "tell" us what she or he says in the paper. If we had the paper in front of us, we could read it and understand it. We simply find it difficult to comprehend when it is delivered orally. It is as if speaking goes with listening and writing goes with reading. And in fact they do.[6]

Written language differs from oral because we use it to accomplish different tasks—for different purposes. We use it to communicate across time and space. We use it to make permanent a thought, an argument, a story, an emotion. And because language is shaped to suit its purposes, we can look at features of both oral and written language as markers of the type.[7]

Some of these markers seem to be related to pragmatic constraints, some to differences in composing constraints, and others to issues of "style." In general, virtually all of us can "recognize" a language sample as "oral" or "written." This is most obvious when comparing prototypes of each, such as (a) a casual, spontaneous conversation and (b) an academic paper. I predict, however, that most of us could distinguish oral from written even when presented with language samples that tend to share many of the same functions and features, such as (a) a telephone conversation with a good friend and (b) a personal letter to the same friend.

Markers that we use to distinguish between oral and written language include vocabulary, syntax, and reference conventions. Written language tends to employ vocabulary items that have been termed "literary" as opposed to "colloquial," for example, *entrance* rather than *door* and *employ* rather than *use*.

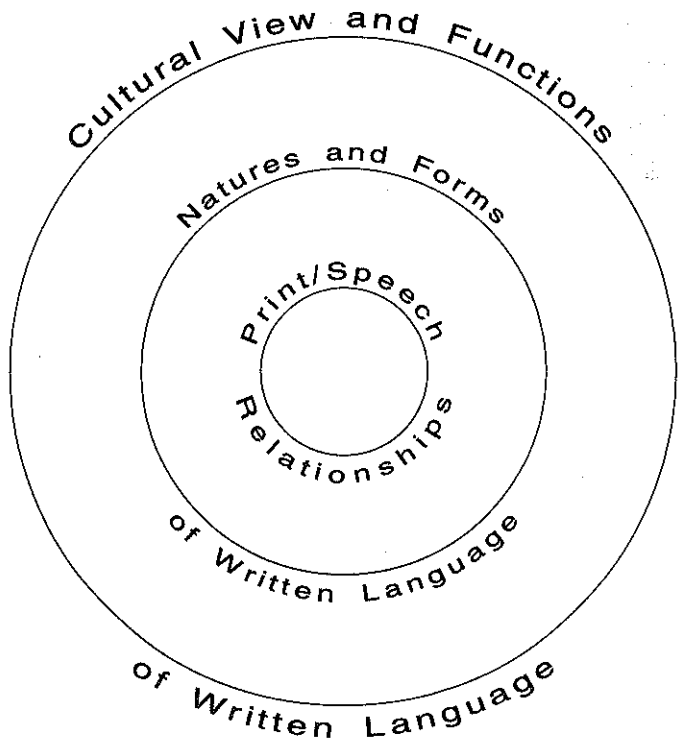
The syntax in written text—including simple children's stories—is more embedded and often transformed. For example, the following construction would rarely be found in speech: *Down the hill ran the green, scaly dragon.* In oral situations, we would more likely encounter something like: *The dragon ran down the hill. He was green and had scales.* Similarly, the dialogue marker—*said the queen*—with the verb position moved to precede the subject is a common occurrence in written text and one that virtually never occurs in speech (with the exception of formal "storytelling"). We would be jarred into concluding that something was "off" if an acquaintance, in relating an event, used a construction such as *"Go to bed," said my mom.*

Finally, within written text, only endophoric references are allowed. Writers may not use a personal pronoun, for example, without providing a referent for it *within* the written text and clearly retrievable by the reader. Speakers can use a pronoun without a referent because they can point to, or by intonation indicate, the man or woman who is being referred to and who is known to the listener. This difference reflects the decontextualized nature of written language as compared with the contextualized nature of oral language.[8]

Given that written language is not simply oral language in print, learning to read and write is not simply a process of learning a written code for speech. Rather, it involves learning to use a different, in many ways "new," language, with all of the complexities of language acquisition that this implies. And children do not wait to learn about this language until they begin formal instruction.

What do children learn about the language of reading and writing during their preinstruction years? Roughly fifteen years of research into this question has yielded some fascinating answers. Young children appear to learn (implicitly, not necessarily explicitly) about written language within roughly three dimensions, each constraining and defining the other (see Figure 1).[9] Everything they learn about written language before schooling is constrained by what they learn about its functions and the values placed on its various forms within their particular sociolinguistic communities and cultures. Within this frame, they learn about the natures, characteris-

FIGURE 1 The Dimensions of Written Language Knowledge Learned by Young Children Through Experience, and Constrained by Cultural Practice, Prior to Formal Instruction



tics, and language forms of written language that are used within their cultures. As children participate in literacy events utilizing these forms of written language, they learn that print is a language signifier—that it carries linguistic meaning—and they learn about the ways in which print represents meaning, the "code" and the conventions of encoding and decoding the print.

The Cultural Contexts of Literacy Acquisition

In the United States, where the ability to read and write is essential to economic and social success, many children are born into a world of written language. Their world abounds with print: signs, menus, forms, directories, newspapers, regulations, instructions, memos, letters, calendars, bills, schedules, and books, to name a few examples.

Denny Taylor studied children from highly literate families.[10] Her revealing account of this research illustrated the experience of children who were growing up in families where "literacy is a part of the very fabric of family life." Reading and writing were interwoven into virtually all of the families' activities. The children learned of reading as one way of listening and of writing as one way of talking. Literacy gave them both status and identity within their community.

The children in Taylor's study were read to from birth; were exposed to notes written by parents to siblings and by siblings to parents; participated in games that involved printed directions; created play that required the printing of such items as a label for a lemonade stand or a list of rules for a newly formed club; observed their parents reading books, newspapers, notes from school, and letters from relatives and others; and daily confronted store signs and advertisements both in the environment and on television. It is within this literate context that these children learned much about the nature and forms of written language.

As children experience and utilize written language to serve different functions such as those just described, they sort out the varying forms print can take. Jerome Harste, Virginia Woodward, and Carolyn Burke describe children as young as three years demonstrating that they know that a grocery list is made up of a vertical list of nouns, representing items to be found in a grocery store, while a letter to grandma is composed of sentences that both inquire about grandma's state and report on personal activities.[11] These researchers also cite evidence that young children in Israel will "scribble-write" from right to left using marks that include the various script features typical of written Hebrew.

Elizabeth Sulzby has demonstrated a clear developmental path from oral to written forms of language produced by children rereading favorite storybooks.[12] I have shown that well-read-to five-year-olds implicitly know the syntax, vocabulary, and decontextualized nature of written stories.[13] When asked to "pretend to read" to a doll, they produce stories that are judged to be written in nature as compared with oral narratives they produce. They "sound" as if they are actually reading a book.

As children interact with written language for specified purposes, they begin to sort out and acquire knowledge about the print itself. They learn about (a) the nature of the relationship between speech and print; (b) the conventions of print, for example, linearity, directionality, and word boundaries; and (c) print-related terms like *word* and *letter*.

The research on literacy acquisition has consistently emphasized that it is the interaction with print by the child that enables this learning. Both reading attempts and writing attempts constitute the forms of interaction. As young children attempt to "read" familiar signs, recurring print in favorite books, and their names, they work toward an understanding of print as a code. Similarly, as they engage in writing attempts from "scribble" writing to invented spelling, they become aware of letter features, letter sequences, and the ways in which certain letters map onto speech units.

According to the schema illustrated in Figure 1, therefore, if storybooks are read and valued within a young child's home, this child will learn that written language is used to record stories that are read for pleasure; that written stories have a particular macrostructure that can be used to predict and recall the story; that written narrative uses particular words and sentence structures that people do not use when conversing; and that print stands for language and can be recorded and decoded via a particular system that in English is alphabetic.[14] This child will learn about the function, nature, and conventions of written stories. Another child who comes from a home where only the Koran is read aloud, and no other uses of print are available, will learn about the function, nature, and conventions of the written Koran but not about written stories. Children learn about what they experience and participate in within their particular sociolinguistic cultures.

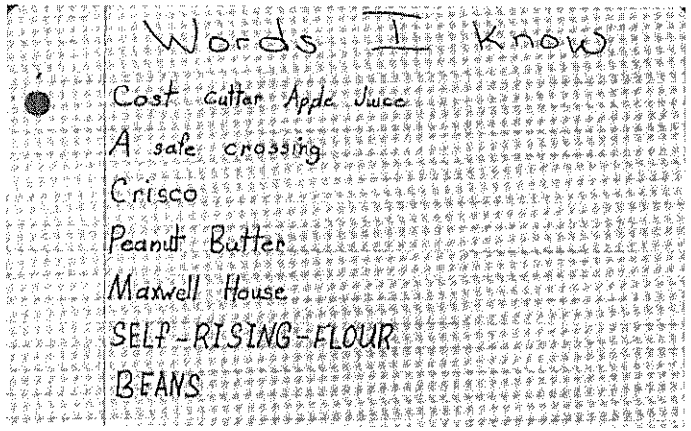
Written language, then, is phenomenon; it is not ubiquitous to all; it is apparent in the environment only to the extent that it is recognized or noticed. It is recognized, or noticed, only to the extent that it is used by fellow members of one's sociocultural/sociolinguistic group.

Donny and Timmy's World: Phenomenologically Almost Print-Free

Donny and Timmy's world was virtually void of functional literacy events beyond the signing of names and an occasional minimal mark on a wall calendar. By this I mean that no one in their immediate family—no one in their home—used print for any other purpose. Neither Jenny nor Big Donny read or wrote *anything* beyond familiar names and simple marks for notations on the calendar.

For a long time I refused to believe Jenny's statement that neither she nor Big Donny could "read a lick." During our first session in the Literacy Center, I asked her to look through a newspaper and its advertisements to find something she could read. With great difficulty, she could decode a few words in a story accompanied by a picture. She identified a few advertised

FIGURE 2 Words Jenny Could Read from Items in Her Kitchen



items that were "things that I know what they mean even if I can't read the words."

I sent her home with the assignment to write down words she could read off of household products in her home. She returned with a list of items (see Figure 2). She could read these to me with difficulty and assured me that she could do this only because she remembered writing them down on the list. "Now if they're on somethin' different, say like *Crisco,* if the word was on somethin' else, I wouldn't know it." She commented that she didn't know how to spell *coffee* since all that was on the can were the words *Maxwell House.*

Over the span of our time together, I confirmed Jenny's claim of nonliteracy. Outside of the home, Jenny used physical markers to locate stores, offices, and items on grocery shelves. She noted size of buildings, colors and shapes of signs, and logos.

These strategies were illustrated for me one day when she related her problems finding the vet's office because it had moved to a new location. Although she had followed the directions given to her over the phone (with important physical landmarks elicited by her), she could not find the office. She returned home and called. With this call, she discovered that they had changed their sign and requested a specific description of the shape of the sign (square), what colors were on it (white and bordered with black), and size (larger than the last one). At no time did she request information about the content, or words, on the sign; that would have been irrelevant information for her.

Jenny tended to shop always in the same few stores, where she was familiar with the arrangement of products. The few times she entered new stores, she usually took a friend with her to help her find what she needed. I accompanied her on several occasions as she sought to purchase items she had seen in the Literacy Center. Looking for alphabet cards, we visited a teacher supply store. Jenny needed my help to decode all print placed to direct shoppers, print on product packages, and print indicating prices. She disliked having to depend on others in this way, and this aversion to dependency was one of her motivations for learning to read.

Within their home, both Big Donny and Jenny functioned without print. Jenny cooked and cleaned from knowledge acquired orally and through experience. The same was true for her quilting activities. She never consulted cookbooks or written recipes from other sources. She never read directions for preparation from food packaging. Whenever she needed this type of information, she would consult friends or family, often over the telephone. When given directions or information, she never wrote it down, relying instead on her memory. If she forgot a particular direction, she would contact her informant again or call someone else.

Big Donny worked as a roofer, when he could find work, and he too used skills and knowledge acquired through experience. He always worked with a contractor or "boss" who told him what to do, when, and where. He did not need to read or write on the jobs he took on. At home Big Donny watched television, including the many videotapes he purchased. Many of these tapes were on natural history or historical topics—two areas of interest to Big Donny. His other source of leisure within the home was drawing. He was a "good drawer," according to Donny, and often drew pictures as gifts for the two boys. His drawing paper and pencils were stored on top of the refrigerator and considered off limits to the rest of the family.

On the family's many trips down home, print was similarly unnecessary. The route on the interstate was familiar from childhood, including the exit and subsequent journey down rural roads. When Jenny was pressed by me, late in the study, for her personal reasons for learning to read, she did say that it would be nice to be able to read the road signs during these trips, just to know what towns they were passing along the way. This was not a pressing concern for her, however.

Nor did the family's activities while down home focus on reading or writing. Rather, the family members engaged in "four-wheelin'," hunting, fishing, visiting with friends and family, cooking, gardening, sewing, and canning.

Big Donny's older brother and his wife lived permanently down home, and the visits centered around their house and one nearby built for Big Donny and Jenny to use. James and Karen were both literate and their children were successful in school. Their older daughter was training to be a nurse during this time. Karen made some books and magazines available and often took on the responsibility of monitoring Donny's homework during extended visits. No one from Jenny and Big Donny's family, though, paid any attention to these sources of print. According to Jenny, whether one could read or write was irrelevant among extended family members or groups of friends.

Literacy Objects Do Not Equal Use

One of the strategies literacy researchers use to measure functional literacy in homes is to make note of artifacts tied to reading and writing. In Jenny's and Donny's home, this strategy did not work. Although there was no evidence of magazines, newspapers, or libraries of well-worn books in the home, it did contain printed material. As noted earlier, the family Bible was prominently displayed on top of the television. There were also two prints on the living room walls with religious sayings appearing in a cross stitch design. In the kitchen, a calendar hung underneath the telephone. During my first visit, Jenny brought down from an upstairs closet two large cardboard boxes filled with children's books. On subsequent visits, she showed me some old books Big Donny had salvaged from building projects. These were also stored upstairs. Thus one could say that this was a home with books.

No one, however, could, or did, read any of these books. The Bible had been in Jenny's family for generations, and it was considered an inherent part of any home. Issues of morality or ethics were often settled by reference to the Bible, but no one in the home could actually read any part of it. Jenny's knowledge of its content had been acquired orally and she transmitted it orally to her children and other adults.

Jenny told me that she had gotten the children's books from relatives or from Goodwill. She had heard that it was important for children to be read to and to have books in the home. She had tried to read out of them to Donny and Timmy but was unable to do so. She had "pieced out" one simple book, but the kids were tired of it and wanted other ones. Big Donny would occasionally "read" these books to the boys by "putting in his own words" to go with the pictures. Jenny objected to this on ethical grounds but would occasionally do it too, when pressed by the kids. When she did this, though, she always told them that she wasn't "really reading" the book. Both boys had their favorites among these books, chosen according to the pictures they liked best. Jenny reported that the books were always stored in the closet and were brought out on occasion to sort through before being packed up again and put away.

The unavailability of print for the family was highlighted for me the day Jenny brought out the collection of old—some of them may have been valuable antiques—books salvaged from building projects by Big Donny. These were large, leatherbound volumes with the edge of their pages gilded in gold. Jenny brought them out to ask me what type of books they were. I looked through two of them, but could not help her because they were written in German. When I told Jenny that I could not read them either, she was surprised. She had assumed that they were simply like all of the other texts she could not read: filled with confusing letters and words. We speculated together on whether or not one was a Bible, based on some of the illustrations. She wondered whether the other one might be an encyclopedia since the text seemed to be arranged like one, although she was not really sure what an encyclopedia was and asked me to explain it to her.

Jenny did make minimal use of print to keep track of appointments and to pay household bills. The calendar under the telephone on the kitchen wall often showed individual numbers or letters printed on the daily squares. Jenny explained that occasioonally she would make a mark on the calendar to help her remember to apply for food stamps or to appear for a teacher confence. There were minimal marks, however, and the bulk of the to-be-remembered items were stored in Jenny's head. In spite of these occassional notations, Jenny several times missed appointments when she would forget to check the calendar.

The kitchen table rested against the wall directly under the calendar, and I always saw a small pile of household bills on it. I finally asked her how she read the bills: how did she know whom to pay, how much, and when? She acknowledged that Carol, her sister-in-law who lived up the hill, or Wanda, her sister, would usually come over to help her. She was able, she said, to read the part that said how much she owed but could not read the other parts explaining the charges. She always paid with cash, and usually in person. A few times, when Karen and James were up visiting from down home, they would help her fill out the forms and mail them for her.

The Effect on Donny and Timmy

Phenomenologically, Donny and Timmy were not growing up in a literate environment. Although they lived in a home situated in a city situated in a country that contained many forms and functions for print, they did not experience it. They did not notice it around them; they did not understand its uses. Their world functioned without written language.

In terms of the emergent literacy conceptual framework (see Figure 1), Donny and his younger brother Timmy learned very little about written language during their preschool years. The uses to which their parents put print framed what Donny had been able to learn by the time I met him—names, minimal marks, and pretend-reading of books with oral language. Beyond this, however, the boys virtually failed to identify print as functional. Several incidents in the Literacy Center illustrated this vividly for me.

One day in the Center, I informed Donny that I was about to leave on a two-week trip to England and, therefore, could not meet with him until I returned. To make up for missing our sessions, I promised to send him a postcard from London.

"What's that?" he wanted to know. I told him that a postcard was like a letter but with a picture on it, usually from the place from which you are sending it. He indicated no understanding of what a letter was.

"I'll buy a postcard with a picture of London Bridge on it," I continued (he knew the nursery rhyme "London Bridge Is Falling Down"), "and on the back of the card I'll write a message to you. It will be like me talking to you from far away."

His polite nod was accompanied with a dismissive shrug. I later mentioned to Jenny that Donny did not know about postcards or letters.

"It's true," she said. "No one writes to us 'cause they all know we can't read it." Although the family did receive mail, no one in the home ever read it. Therefore this was a functional use of written language unknown to Donny.

I did send several postcards from London to both Donny and Jenny after forewarning them to look for them. The messages I wrote could be read by both of them at that time in their instruction, I felt. When I returned I inquired about their receipt. Donny had forgotten about them, and Jenny denied that they had even been delivered. When I described the pictures on them (one of Donny's had been of a red-coated guard with a tall black fur hat), Jenny did vaguely remember seeing such a picture.

"But I never would'a thought to turn it over to see some writin' to me!" she confessed.

On another occasion in the Literacy Center, a suggestion from me led to a further revelation of the extent to which Donny failed to conceptually understand the functional basis of written language. Donny's favorite activities involved making things with his hands. He always rushed into the Center ahead of his mother to the writing area, where he would quickly put together something with the paper, scissors, glue, and string. On one winter day in the first year of our relationship, he proceeded to fold, cut, glue, staple, and produce a kite by the time I had finished greeting Jenny and getting her settled. Other children were evidencing much interest in making a similar kite, and I suggested to Donny that he write a book—with my help—to explain how to make a kite.

"We could add it to the library here in the Center," I explained, "and then whenever someone wants to make a kite like this, they can read the book and do it."

Donny looked at me as if I were speaking in a different language. "Why," he gently explained to me, "I'll just *show* them how to make it."

Taking this opportunity to demonstrate the value of written language over oral, I replied, "Well, you may not be here when someone—who comes to the Center at a different time—wants to make the kite."

"Then, I'll show you, and you can show them," he concluded. Skills, such as making a kite, were acquired through personal experience, demonstration, and oral explanation to Donny's world. Print played no part.

After Schooling

Donny had completed two years of schooling by the time we met. What was the effect of instruction and school activities on his conceptual knowledge base regarding written language? There was some evidence that he had acquired some simple, if incomplete, information regarding the functional nature of print from school. He knew that print could encode names (initially experienced and later reinforced in his home)—in particular, his first name. He could write his name when asked and could read it when someone else pointed it out to him. He could write nothing else, however.

Donny also knew that within the context of a book, print was "read." He revealed this early in our association when as we looked through a children's book, he pointed to a page with pictures but no words and commented, "This is a thinkin' page!" and pointed to the following page that contained words and said, "This is a readin' page!" Again, this was a concept that had been introduced in his home.

The powerful interplay between home and school learning was evidenced in Donny's belief of what constituted "readin'." When asked to read a page of print, he readily looked at the pictures and provided his "own words," just as his parents did at home. These words could change from one reading to the next because in his conceptual network, print did not play the role of holding language static. A "reader" rendered oral language—which could be quite rich—in the context of pictures within a book. The black marks that we call "print" were irrelevant; they could have been fly specks for all they had to do with the language one used when reading.

Donny had also learned a school-typed use of written language that, in the world of people's lives, is considered more of a prerequisite to use: he knew that letters were named and printed as isolated units of the "alphabet." He had not completely mastered this by the beginning of second grade, but he could accurately recognize about two-thirds of the letters in the alphabet and accurately reproduce about 90 percent of those. Although he would never choose to do this on his own, he could perform these tasks when directed to by a teacher.

When we first met, Donny could "do school" on a surface level. He had learned to fill in blanks of worksheets, circle words on worksheets, pay attention to the teacher, and "follow along" in his book as the teacher, or someone else, read. Early in the study, I observed him one day in his second-grade classroom. His teacher was reading a story to the class while the children followed in their own copies of the book. At least, this was the teacher's intention. The majority of the children, however, were scuffling, calling out, crawling around the room, and laughing and talking together. Donny, though, sat quietly in his seat. His eyes were focused on the pages of his book, and he remembered to move them at times and occasionally turn the pages—which never quite matched those his teacher was reading from.

Finally, the young, frustrated teacher gave up reading and began a lesson on "telephone manners," which called for some role playing. This increased the attention of most of the children. During this time, though, Donny had his head buried under the lift-up top of his desk and was engaged in cleaning and ordering its contents.

The "telephone manners" lesson soon led to a worksheet event, and the teacher handed each child a mimeographed page with a list of words at the top and a series of numbered sentences below. Each sentence had a blank in it that the children were to fill in with one of the listed words. The teacher instructed them to "write the words that fit in the blanks." She led the class through the words and each sentence orally, giving them the answers. Unfortunately, Donny's head was still buried in his desk.

When the children began to fill in the blanks with pencils, though, he quickly began work. As I watched in amused consternation, he measured each word with his two index fingers, moved them to the blanks and matched word to sentence according to the perceived "fit." He then copied the word into the blank. Retrieving the paper later, I confirmed that none of the sentences made sense as he had completed them. But that was irrelevant to Donny; he had completed the task as he had interpreted its demands: matching objects by length—"fitting" words to blanks.

The emergent literacy framework indicates that children will learn about the natures and forms of written language according to those functions they see print fulfilling in their lives. Donny had thus learned about letters and form as these applied to the writing of his name and to the recognition and printing of the letters of the alphabet. He had, however, almost no implicit notions of the vocabulary, syntax, or decontextualized nature of written language as found in books, letters, environmental signs, written directions, or personal notices.

The most startling insight for me as I worked with Donny and analyzed the data I collected over the two years was that for Donny, print did not signify; it did not code his world; it was not linguistically meaningful. Donny did not *notice* the print around him; it did not emerge perceptually from the background of his life. He never traveled the route of other children from literate homes who, for example, progress from first noticing the "Stop" sign and its role in directing drivers to stop, to understanding that the letters s-t-o-p "say" *Stop.* In answer to my questioning, Jenny reported that neither child ever asked about what the words or print in their environment "said." Rather, the children learned to use the symbols their parents used: physical landmarks, colors, and shapes.

If we consider Donny and Timmy in terms of the inner dimension of the emergent literacy conceptual framework, we find that the boys had no sense that print operates as a code. Without the context of functional uses of print in their world, they never thought to explore its symbolic nature through pretend readings or writing attempts during their preschool years. Paper and pencils in the home were not tools for writing to Donny and Timmy. If they were available, they were for drawing like their dad did. . . .

At the beginning of his second-grade year, Donny did not know all of the names of the letters of the alphabet. He did not know what a printed "word" was in the sense of matching an oral word with a printed word bounded by white space; when he "read" a memorized text of *Three kangaroos live here,* for example, he ran his fingers under *live here* as he "read" the last two syllables of *kangaroo.* He did not know what a "letter" was as distinguished from other printed marks such as periods and commas; he did not know that his oral words could be written down; rather he believed that only "book words" could be copied (this belief was also held by his mother regarding her own language . . .).

At the beginning of his second-grade year, Donny could read only his first name and, with prodding and time to reflect, the word *the.* He could write only his first name. Like any other seven-year-old with at least normal intelligence, he had conceptualized his world as he had experienced it. When he began first grade, at age six, he had made sense of his instruction as it fit with his already-held beliefs, understandings, and skills. The marginal impact of instruction in reading and writing reflected the wide gap between his world without print and that assumed by the schools.