



Communicating with intent: A study of social awareness and children's writing

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ABSTRACT

This research examined relationships between children's social awareness (ability to understand and negotiate intergroup relationships) and their narrative and persuasive writing. Forty 5th grade students wrote a short fictional narrative and a persuasive letter to their principal. Writing samples were coded for quality, form, and social awareness. Students also completed a questionnaire assessing their capacity to understand and negotiate social relationships. Scores from literacy assessments in vocabulary, reading, and reading comprehension were also obtained. Results suggest that children's quality of writing depends on both literacy and social skills. There was a positive relationship between social awareness and quality of writing in persuasive letters, controlling for vocabulary and demographic characteristics. In narratives, the positive effect was moderated by students' reading skill. The magnitude of the social awareness effect was stronger in the narratives of children who were below average readers, controlling for background characteristics. The paper highlights the educational importance of teaching both social and literacy skills in the classroom.

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1. Introduction

Dear Principal,

I know there is a conflict, between Spanish speaking and English speaking students around the school. This shows more during recess hour's, because there is a disagreement about who's turn it is to use the playground. That makes it hard for other students and me to enjoy the play time, resulting in arguments and fights. I think it should be made clear to all students as to who, and when the playground should be use. I appreciate if you would take the time to talk to us when ever it's convenient for you.

Sincerely,

Claudia

Claudia, a Latina 5th grade student, wrote this letter to her school principal to fulfill an assignment in a curriculum designed to teach both literacy and social skills. Claudia's writing is not perfect, but her letter directs the principal's attention towards an

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important social issue—intergroup conflict—and asks for his help in resolving it. Is Claudia's letter persuasive? Will it prompt her principal to take action? If so, is it because of her writing skill? Or is it because of Claudia's ability to identify and resolve intergroup relationships—her “social awareness”?

Schools today are under enormous pressure to promote the academic success of their students. Children have to learn to communicate effectively in different contexts, both personal and academic. Claudia, for example, will not only need her writing skills to bring social problems to her principal's attention, but she will also need them to pass state, local, and national tests (Crammond, 1998). Despite their visibility on standardized tests, however, writing assessments pose a dilemma for teachers and researchers. Most educators recognize writing is an act of communication—adults and children write to share stories, learn personal histories, debate a topic, and influence legislation (Crammond, 1998; McCabe & Peterson, 1991). However, teachers are often reduced to teaching the skills, such as grammar, structure, and vocabulary, which are actually captured by assessments (Strickland et al., 2001). Left behind is the acknowledgement that we write to form connections with other people, and may use our social skills as much as our literacy skills to communicate effectively.

This study investigated the relationship between social and academic competence by studying children's writing. Specifically, we suggest that children display “social awareness” (an ability to identify and negotiate intergroup relationships) in their writing, and that quality of their writing depends on both literacy and social awareness skills. We begin by presenting a theoretical basis for the study, drawing from research in the fields of social cognition, social development, literacy, and writing. The concept of “social awareness” is introduced, based on a framework that analyzes the development of social understanding and relationship management in childhood and adolescence (Selman, 1980, 2003; Selman & Schultz, 1990). We then present an empirical study that describes an analysis of students' persuasive letters and narratives for evidence of social awareness, and how the results of that text-based analysis compared to an independent measure. Finally, we present findings that suggest a positive relationship may exist between the quality of children's writing and the social awareness they demonstrate in their writing.

1.1. *Social cognitive and developmental theory*

The field of social cognition broadly encompasses the social and psychological worlds of people and their behavior (Flavell & Miller, 1998). One form of social cognition is perspective-taking, which has been defined as a person's capacity to understand another person's point of view, mental state, or emotions (Eisenberg, Fabes, & Spinrad, 2006; Selman, 1980). The ability to differentiate and coordinate the social perspectives of self and others, cognitively and emotionally, forms the basis of social communication as well as action (Eisenberg & Fabes, 1998; Flavell & Miller, 1998; Selman, 1980). A developmental approach suggests this capacity becomes both more sophisticated and more differentiated with age and maturity.

A child's capacity to coordinate multiple points of view towards shared social experiences may promote the development of interpersonal understanding and relational management skills (Selman, 1980; Selman & Schultz, 1990). Over time, as children learn to see other people's points of view and integrate them with their own, they are more apt to display deeper understandings about other people—such as their thoughts, feelings, and motivations—and as a result are better able to manage relationships in their lives. Thus far, this theory has been used to understand the development of peer relationships (Selman, Watts, & Schultz, 1997), risk-taking behavior such as fighting and drinking (Selman & Adalbjarnardottir, 2000; Selman & Dray, 2006; Selman et al., 1992), and student engagement in intervention programs (Adalbjarnardottir, 1993; Schultz, Barr, & Selman, 2001; Schultz, Selman, & LaRusso, 2003). It may also help explain children's developing awareness of societal (not just “social”) topics such as race, social class, or gender (Selman, 2003; Selman & Dray, 2003). The present study builds on this research and links it with the domain of language and literacy.

1.2. *Social cognition in writing*

All writing is an act of communication—at the other end of the text is a reader, an audience, who is grappling with the author's words and meanings (Ede & Lunsford, 1984). Many researchers credit social cognition, and perspective-taking in particular, as being central to the process of composing written texts. Writers often adapt their writing according to their audience (Bonk, 1990; Frank, 1992). In fact, research in audience awareness influenced college composition instructors to encourage writers to imagine, revise for, and obtain feedback from the writer's potential audience (Ede & Lunsford, 1984). But instructors reported that college students were often “egocentric” in their writing, rarely considering what their audience needed or wanted to know (Ede & Lunsford, 1984). This led to questions about whether audience awareness was a sophisticated writing technique only observable in and teachable to expert, rather than novice, writers (Rubin & Rafoth, 1986; Temple, Nathan, Burris, & Temple, 1988).

Recently, however, raising writers' awareness of audience has resurfaced as an instructional technique for younger children. Arguing against the idea that young children might be too egocentric to understand their audience, Frank (1992) and Wollman-Bonilla (2001) investigated audience awareness in the writing of elementary school students. Both found that younger children could target their writing when the audience was made known to them (Frank, 1992; Wollman-Bonilla, 2001). Even very young children could demonstrate audience awareness when they were given strong instructional support, interesting tasks, and when they were writing for a familiar audience such as their parents (Wollman-Bonilla, 2001).

Several studies suggest that relationships between social cognition and writing may be observable only in particular genres. In some instances, improvements in quality were seen only in genres that seemed to call for audience understanding. Rubin and Rafoth (1986), for instance, found that college students with higher social cognition scores wrote more persuasive essays but not better expository text. Other researchers, however, have suggested social cognition is essential to the composition of narratives.

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