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## **Gender and cultural differences: A sociocognitive perspective on parent involvement in students' autobiographies**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This inquiry examined the types of literacy support parents gave their children at home, with fifteen students from a diverse class of 23 third graders, during an eight week integrated unit on writing autobiographies. A naturalistic inquiry approach found pattern differences between genders, with respect to the nature of support given at home. Boys, particularly the African American males, received more explicit guidance than girls did. Understanding the nature of parent literacy support can inform ways to connect home and school literacy experiences.

*So we kind of coaxed her into thinking about it more and we weren't necessarily putting words into her head but trying to get her — "Well, OK, what about that then? Didn't you think about this? And then she would [reply] "Oh yeah." So it was kind of coaxing it out of her I guess in a way, but we tried to let her think of as much as possible, or if we didn't think it was enough we would say, "Well, don't you think you could say a little more about that?" ...So really I guess it was trying to let her do the thinking process, trying to get her a little bit on a schedule as far as the things she had to do, and just kind of not really leading, but trying to get her a little bit on a schedule as far as the things she had to do, and just kind of not really leading, but trying to give her some direction.*

*(Parent interview, March 1997)*

The above quotation is a mother's recollection of how she and her husband supported their daughter during her autobiography writing project. A sociocognitive view of learning asserts that learners construct meaning by interacting with adults or more capable peers in valued and functional social contexts (Langer, 1987; Vygotsky, 1978). These interactions can include observing a behavior modeled by an expert, experimenting with peers, and receiving explicit guidance. The latter can take on various forms including direct instruction, support offered when needed, questions asked by the "expert," and the structures that guide activities (Langer, 1991).

Student learning in school is fostered when the sociocognitive principles guide classroom experiences to provide purposeful activities that are congruent to students' cultural experiences from their home and community (Delpit, 1995; Heath, 1983; Irvine, 1991; Ladson-Billings, 1994). A few ethnographic studies sample a range of ethnic groups and lower to middle income families to find out what types of literacy events occur naturally at home (Heath, 1983; Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines, 1988; Moll, 1994; Morrow, 1996; Snow, 1983). These studies showed that all of the children, regardless of their background, were involved in functional literacy events, though often these experiences were not congruent with the types of literacy events typically found in schools.

In the area of writing, recent work has focused on the writing process and fostering individual writing development in more relevant and interactive contexts (Applebee, 1981; Atwell, 1987; Calkins, 1994; Graves, 1975; Smith, 1982; Zelman and Daniels, 1988). This approach emphasizes immersion in authentic writing experiences that communicate to real audiences. In classrooms, this is often implemented through a writing workshop. Students make choices about what they want to write and work at their own levels. A social context fosters collaboration and replaces the teaching of isolated skills in formal grammar instruction. Instead, skills are taught through interactions with the teacher and peers based on individual student needs and within writing contexts.

The effectiveness of the workshop approach for diverse learners whose experiences are linguistically and culturally different from mainstream practices and expectations has been challenged recently (Delpit, 1995; Reyes, 1992; Willis, 1995). The argument is that the process approach does not teach linguistically and culturally diverse children the discourse patterns and literacy codes that are used and respected in the "culture of power." Delpit recommends a combination process-oriented and skills-oriented approach within meaningful,

communicative contexts. In doing this students "must be allowed the resource of the teacher's expert knowledge, while being helped to acknowledge their own 'expertness' as well" (p. 45).

Studies that have focused specifically on the literacy and writing development of diverse learners have considered the development of both literacy skills and literate behaviors within social and cultural contexts (Dyson, 1993; Heath, Mangiola, Schecter, and Hall, 1991). A common thread among these effective literacy environments is that they build upon students' cultural knowledge and broaden the possibilities for what counts as a valued literacy experience. In addition, they use authentic experiences, provide instruction to develop the skills for composing texts, and create social contexts that invite learners to construct and negotiate their formal communication practices.

The inquiry for this study resulted from my interest to create a writing workshop approach that would effectively foster writing development and would give voice to my diverse group of learners' cultural identities. In particular, I wanted to understand the off-task behavior of the African American males in my classroom during informal writers' workshop sessions. According to Delpit (1995) and Murrell (1993), African-American boys are disproportionately disciplined and assigned to special education for learning problems when classrooms are not congruent with their learning and social styles. They "exhibit a high degree of physicality and desire for interaction" (Delpit, p. 168).

The purpose of my inquiry was to gain insight into the role that parents and home cultures played in supporting their children's writing development. By learning about the way literacy practices occur at home, we can understand the cultural knowledge and values that learners hold, and make informed decisions that will build upon the cultural foundations unique to each individual. In doing this, we can strive to provide scaffolds where cultural incongruities between home and school occur.

The question that guided my inquiry arises from a sociocognitive perspective: What was the nature of the interaction when a parent and child engaged in a writing task? Although the subject of parent involvement on children's writing has been studied during a child's emergent writing stages and within the contexts of home literacy (Heath, 1983; Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines, 1988; Teale, 1986), the nature of parent involvement with older children's formal writing development has not been examined.

## METHOD

### *Participants*

The site for this inquiry was my self-contained diverse class of 23 third grade students, during an eight week integrated unit of study on writing autobiographies. My classroom was part of a K-5 ethnically, culturally, and linguistically diverse public school, located in a metropolitan area in the southeast. Among my 23 students, 52% were African American, 22% were Caucasian, 13% were Asian, 9% were multi-racial, and 4% were Hispanic. In addition, approximately 43% received free or reduced lunches, close to 20% spoke a language other than English at home, and 9% received English to speakers of other languages (ESOL) services.

Since the data included taped interviews of the students' parents during spring conferences, this inquiry focused only on the 15 students whose parents I was able to record. This included six of the girls (66% African American and 33% Caucasian) and nine of the boys (67% African American, 22% Caucasian, and 4% multi-racial). The eight students whose parent conferences were not included in the study were either due to the parents' limited language abilities or scheduling conflicts. As one would infer, the role that non-native speaking parents played in their children's project was oral in nature, allowing the situation for these students to be independent in translating and recording their information.

### *Materials and procedures*

Prior to the students' winter holidays, we discussed the upcoming unit on autobiographies. I explained to the students that they would take home a packet and would have the winter holidays to collect information about their lives. The packets contained sheets for the data collection, guidelines for collecting information, and a confirmation slip to be signed and returned, indicating that the packet was received. All of the slips were returned prior to the holidays. The tasks for collecting the data included: 1) describing a significant event for each year of the student's life; 2) collecting anecdotal memories that family members had about the student; and 3) interviewing an older family member about what he/she remembered about his/her third grade experience. In addition, I sent a letter to the parents that asked them to write a letter to their child about the day their child was born. To accommodate the non-English speaking parents, one of the letters was written in Spanish, and arrangements were made with the Cambodian families to have an

English fluent family member (one of the student's uncle in high school) assist with this project. I emphasized, both in the guidelines and during oral directions to the students, that parents and other family members could assist in the writing of the project. This was to encourage the assisting adults to serve as models when needed. In addition, the record sheets for collecting the information about their lives were open ended to accommodate different styles for recording the information. I speculated that this project would be a positive experience for both parents and students. Writing about the children's lives provided a topic that was authentic and valued, and positioned parents as the primary sources and "experts."

The completed data packets were used during the autobiography unit as information sources for the writing projects. This included a timeline of their lives and a hardbound autobiography that contained expository writing, poetry, and a letter to their parents. This unit also included activities that integrated other content areas to provide occasions for students to share and reflect on what they were learning about themselves as individuals and as members of different communities.

### *Writer's workshop*

The writing workshop in this classroom incorporated both a process-oriented and skills-oriented approach. Most workshop sessions began with an author lesson to teach and model writing forms and the elements of the writing process. Often writing frames were used to provide a scaffold for learning paragraph development and text structures. Lessons were followed by a large block of time for students to work on their projects in progress. At this time I assisted students during informal conferences and encouraged peers to assist each other in their writing development. As a rule, students were to have three peers read their drafts and make at least one content change for a first draft and at least one editing change for a second draft. Those students who finished a writing project early and did a quality job, were often asked to assist those in need of help. The final moments of the workshop were devoted to the author's chair, in which one or two students were asked to read a work in progress, in order to receive feedback from the whole group concerning the strengths and weaknesses of their work.

### *Initial patterns*

All 23 packets were returned by the end of the week, following the winter holidays. During an informal examination of the completed

packets, I noticed some differences with respect to how the packets were completed. In particular, I noticed a range in who actually wrote the information (handwritten by child or adult) and the sophistication of the responses (child or adult constructed). I noticed patterns with respect to the amount of written support given by gender and ethnicity. Initially, I tallied who was involved in writing the information by three categories: (1) completed by the parent only; 2) completed by both parent and student; or 3) completed by the student only (See Table 1).

Table 1.

Who Wrote the Information

<i>Group</i>	<i>(n)</i>	<i>Parent</i>	<i>Both</i>	<i>Student</i>
Af Am Males	7	57%	28%	14%
Other Males	5	40%	40%	20%
Af Am Females	5	0%	40%	60%
White Females	3	33%	33%	33%
ESOL Females	3	0%	33%	67%

Although the samples were too small to consider the data with respect to ethnicity beyond my classroom, there was more substantial evidence to note a consistent trend when comparing data by gender. Little, however, could be inferred about the literacy process by only examining the written product. As stated earlier, I was interested in understanding the support that was provided at home during this project. Specifically, I was interested in the roles of the child and parent during their interaction. Admittedly, I was so focused on learning about the cultural literacy practices in my students' homes that the strong gender pattern surprised me.

I interviewed the parents during parent-teacher conferences to understand more about the literacy event and nature of the support that occurred at home. The following questions were generated to guide the interview and to obtain information about how the parents and children worked on the project at home and what their attitudes were about the project:

- 1) Who helped the student?
- 2) Who initiated how to work on the project?
- 3) Describe the process that was taken in completing the project.  
(What roles did those involved play?)

- 4) What were the positive aspects of the project?
- 5) What difficulties did you encounter?

### *Parent interviews*

I conducted the interviews in March, during the school's spring conference period. At the start of each conference, I asked parents if I could tape record part of their session that included questions concerning the project. I explained to them that I was interested in learning about what occurred at home during the project's information collection phase. I had a strong rapport with my parents, many of whom I had known for two years, after moving up with the class from last year. All parents agreed to be taped, without reservations. The data packets were present during the interview to aid parents in their recollections.

After a week of interviewing, I transcribed the tapes of the fifteen interviews and coded them for anonymity. I used a naturalistic inquiry approach (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) to examine the parents' responses to the questions. Using the procedures for constant comparative analysis (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), patterns emerged with respect to gender. The themes that emerged from the interview were triangulated with the written data packets in regards to whose handwriting (child or parent) wrote the responses and whose language and vocabulary (child or parent) was used in the responses. In addition, I conducted informal interviews with the students to obtain their perspective on how the project was completed when more clarification was needed. The results that follow will focus only on those areas that showed pattern differences between genders. In addition, responses from the six African American males will be presented to illustrate patterns that can offer insight into understanding social incongruities between the classroom workshop approach and the writing support received at home.

## RESULTS

### *Who helped the student?*

Although there were reports of other family members who provided content for the students' packets, parents were the primary supporters. The results of which parent(s) played the primary role, indicated that the males had more support from their fathers than the females. Only mothers attended the six female students' conferences, and only one described the support role as mutually shared by herself and her husband. Five of the male students' conferences were attended by their



mothers, and all reported being the primary supporter. Two of the male students' conferences were attended by both parents, and both reported a collaborative role in supporting their children. The other two male students' conferences were attended by their fathers. Both of these fathers reported being the primary supporter. In one case, the student was in the custody of his father. In the second case, the father played a stronger role due to the fact that his wife was Korean and felt inadequate about her English skills. It is important to note here that there were no consistent patterns with respect to the presence or absence of father support.

Table 2.

Who Helped the Student

<i>Group</i>	<i>Mother</i>	<i>Both</i>	<i>Father</i>
Males	56%	22%	22%
Females	83%	16%	0%

*Who initiated how to work on the project?*

Three themes emerged in response to this question: 1) the parent initiated a plan; 2) the effort was collaborative and all involved made decisions; or 3) the child was the initiator. Among the nine parents of the males, five parents indicated that they initiated the project, and the other four parents reported a more collaborative approach. In contrast, only one parent of the six females initiated the task, two parents reported a collaborative method, and three described how the girls initiated the task. Table 3 compares the results according to gender by percentages.

Table 3.

Who Decided How to Work on the Project

<i>Group</i>	<i>Parent</i>	<i>Combination</i>	<i>Student</i>
Males	55%	44%	0%
Females	16%	33%	50%

The following are examples of interview responses. The point of view that parents used to recall the experience most often indicated the degree of interaction that took place.

*Parent initiated*

*Father: Well I had... Ernie was writing down a few ideas, but he kind of scribbled them on paper, so I kind of, sort of rewrote the ideas — more or less put them in a format of year by year. (M1)*

*Mother: I came to that conclusion and I helped him and I thought it would be good if he initially wrote it himself. (M2)*

*Worked collaboratively*

*Mother: As far as — I don't know we just all kind of talked together. (M7)*

*Mother: Well, that's a good question. Well kind of all of us and I tried to get from Julie what she was supposed to do. (F1)*

*Student initiated*

*Mother: I was probably cooking while she was asking the questions. (F2)*

*Mother: Edith wanted to write everything. She asked most of the questions. She asked her dad a lot of questions that he didn't know the answers to! So I had to answer a lot. (F6)*

*Describe the process that was taken in completing the project*

An analysis of this question showed that the responses addressed two different stages. The first was the process of selecting what to include, and the second addressed the support given during the composing process. In the stage of selection, the following categories were created to label the emerging patterns: 1) parent directed; 2) a collaborative effort often involving negotiation, and 3) student directed.

Among the nine parents of the males, three indicated that they directed the selection of events and six described a collaborative effort. None of the responses indicated that the child was the one who primarily chose what to include. In contrast, among the six parents of the females, none indicated that they were the ones who chose the event. Instead, one parent described a collaborative process, and the rest of the

parents described their child as being the one who chose what she wanted to include (See Table 4).

Table 4

The Process: Selecting the Information

<i>Group</i>	<i>Parent</i>	<i>Combination</i>	<i>Student</i>
Males	33%	66%	0%
Females	0%	16%	83%

Below are some examples of responses about the process of selecting.

*Information was selected by parent*

*Mother: I reflected on some things that were precious to me in reference to those questions. (M2)*

*Mother: Well for most of this, the earlier days I just told him, because he really didn't remember. The things that were most important to him were Disney Land, going to Denver, stuff like that. I mean, otherwise he was like, "Oh, OK." (M6)*

Those parents who reported that all involved had input in selecting the information described their negotiating processes. Some instances indicated a kind of dissonance due to either a discrepancy that an event occurred at a particular age or to embarrassing moments that students did not want to share.

*Information was jointly selected*

*Mother: Well some things he came up with — No I came up with and he was like, "I don't want to put that down," — like when uh — what was it you were talking about — (to child) — you didn't want to write down there? — Something embarrassing, I can't remember. (M5)*

*Mother: She was more "Mom don't put that part in, put that part in" — You know, instead of putting in everything we tried to pick the most interesting moment. (F3)*

Those who described the selection process as being carried out by the student, indicated that the parent was a part of the process of gathering the information for each year, but took a “step back” to allow the child to make the choice.

*Information was chosen by the student*

*Mother: She and I would discuss things that happened when she was one and she chose out of that what we talked about — what to put down. (F2)*

*Mother: I would just tell her what was going on and then she chose the one she wanted to put down. (F5)*

There were four categories that emerged when examining the data for patterns regarding the amount of support given in composing the information (See Table 5). The writing was either done by: 1) the parent; 2) both the parent and the child; 3) the student, but the parent helped with the content and mechanics, or 4) the student, but the parent helped with the mechanics (spelling, punctuation, etc.). This portion of the analysis provided more explanation about what kind of support students received when they were the writers. Some of the students wrote the information in their own words, but may have received help with their form (spelling, punctuation, and grammar). Others wrote it themselves, but received support as far as what to write (content) and how to phrase it, usually in addition to help with mechanics.

Table 5

The Process: Composing the Information

<i>Group</i>	<i>Parent</i>	<i>Combination</i>	<i>Student w/ Content support</i>	<i>Studentw/ form support</i>
Males	44%	11%	44%	0%
Females	0%	50%	0%	50%

A second gender related pattern was evident in the roles played while composing the information. Four of the nine parents for the males indicated that they composed the information for their child. Only one parent shared the writing task with the child. The four boys who wrote the information were assisted with both the content and the mechanics. An opposite trend for the girls was reported. None of the

girls' packets were reported as being composed exclusively by the parent. Three of the six girls shared the writing task with their parents. Among the girls who composed their texts, all three students were helped primarily with mechanics. None of the responses made by the parents of the females for the independent writers, indicated that they were assisted with their content.

The following responses illustrate the kinds of roles that were played during the composing process. In examining the responses of those parents who wrote the information, the parents had felt the student would have done an inadequate job.

*Parent composed*

*Mother: I figured it would be better for me to write it, so somebody could read it. (M4)*

*Mother: I wrote it down. So we just sat here with the pictures and I wrote certain sentences... trying to get him to understand how to write sentences properly, is I'm sure you know is difficult. (M6)*

Those parents who shared the writing did so for the sake of getting it done on time and sharing the "labor" of writing.

*Both parent and child composed*

*Father: We were just getting closer to deadline so I had to just start writing. (M8)*

*Mother: She wrote it — I wrote some of it. We just took turns — "Mom my hand hurts." (F3)*

Although the following students performed the actual writing of the task, the parent responses indicated differences in the amount of support given with respect to content and/or form.

*Student composed and parent helped with the content*

*Mother: We made him write it. We pretty much told him what to say. (M7)*

*Father: I try to put the idea in his head and I say well tell me, if you went to South Korea, tell me what you would say and then try to write it down in the same way. (M9)*

*Student composed and parent helped with form*

*Mother: She might have asked me a couple of how to spell something, but she basically did the sentences and stuff.*  
(F5)

*Mother: She always put them down in her own words.*  
(F2)

#### *Patterns among the African American males*

In examining the responses from the parents of the African American males, found that most of the responses fell into categories that indicated a relatively high degree of support.

Table 6.

#### Roles Played Among African American Males and Their Parents

<i>Role Played</i>	<i>Parent</i>	<i>Combination</i>	<i>Student</i>
Initiated	66%	33%	0%
Selected	50%	50%	0%
Composed	50%	16%	33%*

Note. \*Assistance with content was reported. No parents of the students who composed the information, reported that they assisted with the mechanics only.

Overall the parents of the males provided more explicit guidance and made more contributions to the information in the packets than the parents of the females. When excluding the three males who were not African American, a slightly stronger trend shows that the African American males received more support than the females. Although among individual cases the degree of support fluctuated from a high degree of parent assistance to a collaborative effort, almost none of the responses indicated that the students ever wanted to take charge as did some of the females.

There was, however, one African American male who played an integral role in completing his project. For example, he was taught a strategy on how to take notes, and used the strategy with the help of his aunt to record his information. This type of support was unique to all of the cases, including the females. The following excerpt is from the interview with his mother:

*Teacher: Who helped collect the information — Did you mostly assist him?*

*Mother: Yes I helped him. His aunt, his grandfather, and his grandmother and his father contributed a little.*

*Teacher: And then who decided how you would work on the project?*

*Mother: Basically that was a collaboration between LaMar and his Aunt Alicia. She helped with that.*

*Teacher: And tell me a little bit about LaMar's role in the project. What was his job and what were the jobs of the aunt and you?*

*Mother: OK well LaMar mainly asked the questions and what it was is like... we all gathered around and he asked the questions and whoever knew something just jumped in and started talking about it and elaborated and uh she showed him how to take notes so he jotted down a few things.*

*Teacher: OK, so there was some assistance in the writing?*

*Mother: Uh huh, not so much in the writing, but in saying LaMar when you hear a key word you need to write it down so that you'll remember.*

This same student was also the male exception when observing his behavior during writers' workshop. He was consistently on task, exhibited a high degree of self-motivation, and was the second student to finish his hardbound autobiography. He also produced one of the most detailed and well-written books.

#### IMPLICATIONS FOR THE CLASSROOM

The small sample size and representations of gender and ethnic groups limits the findings to my classroom. Another limitation is the long time lapse between the home component of the project and the parent interviews. In addition, it is important to note that the data are based on parents' recollections of their experience rather than the actual discourse that occurred at home. Triangulating the data, however, with the data packets that the students completed at home, in addition to informal student interviews, validated the findings from the interviews. In addition, the fact that parents openly admitted when they completed the majority of the home assignment suggests that they were honest reports.

This inquiry illustrates that my students and parents did engage in different types of interactions at home, as defined by the sociocognitive

perspective (Langer, 1991), when parents assisted their children in their literacy development. There were consistent patterns to substantiate that the boys in this study were given more explicit guidance than girls, particularly the African American males of the group. Although it is beyond the scope of this inquiry to determine why the parents shaped the children's literacy experiences so differently with respect to gender, there is evidence in the literature to support gender differences in literacy are influenced by sociocultural factors. A few studies have considered the notion that reading and writing are viewed as female activities (Pottorff, Phelps-Zientarski, and Skovera, 1996; Price and Graves, 1980). Others have found that boys and girls have different writing interests, with girls writing more personal themes, such as family, whereas boys seldom write in first person and choose aggressive characters (Graves, 1975; Freedman, 1995; Thomas, 1997). Even though the writing topics centered on each student, it is possible that a lack of self-motivation for writing about oneself, by the boys, provoked more explicit support on the part of the males' parents.

Future investigations of the types of literacy practices used at home and modeled by male and female parents may provide information on how literacy practices may be perceived as gender roles. These roles may also be defined differently within different cultural settings. In addition, a more comprehensive look at the actual discourse that occurred during these practices would provide more insight into the support that was given to each child. It would be equally valuable to compare the discourse practice between the teacher and students and among peer collaboration to understand what circumstances help students to construct knowledge in various settings (See Simmons, 1997, on the social process of writing and gender similarities).

By gaining insight into the way parents support their children's writing, we can begin to understand the cultural knowledge that students hold and the behaviors that they exhibit. Earlier observations during writers' workshop that noted the off-task behavior of some of the males, particularly the African American males, may be explained by their inexperience with directing their literacy learning, as illustrated by the parent responses. These were the same students who were able to successfully apply the skills when I worked with them one-on-one. The results of this investigation informed me that although the writing instruction involved direct instruction and teacher modeling, some of the students were still being asked to take a giant leap when it became time to apply the writing skills. It appeared that although I spent much preparation in teaching the explicit skills and forms for good writing,

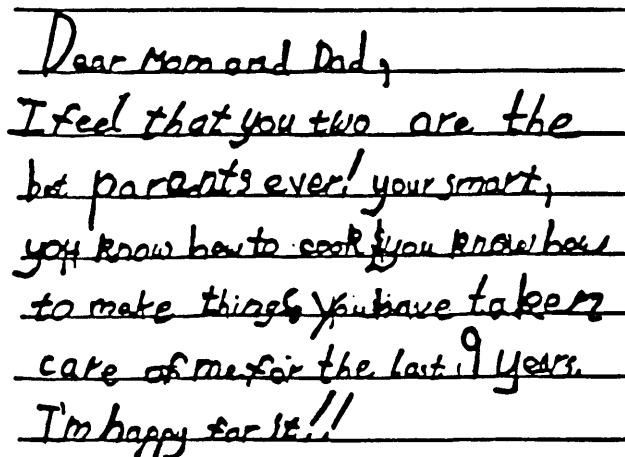


more work was needed to foster the literate behaviors of my male students. Although many of the girls took charge of the assigned task, with their parents serving either as collaborators or resources, the boys were more often explicitly directed. Their parent support ranged from collaborator to initiator, in everything from organizing the way the task would be completed, choosing the information for the project, and translating that information into a written format.

Overall the project was a wonderful success. All of the parents interviewed commented on the joys that reliving memories brought, and students loved to learn about the early years they could not remember. The sharing of letters of older family members' own third-grade experiences brought significant discussions, as when the student who shared her grandmother's memory of being the only black child in her classroom. Composing the assignments for the autobiographies was indeed a challenge for my boys. After examining the literature on writing differences, I wonder if I should have provided more choice. It also occurs to me that in fostering those literate behaviors for writing, more could have been done to capitalize on their very strong verbal abilities. Lessons can be gleaned from LaMar's family and their guidance in teaching him to take notes during their oral recounts of LaMar's childhood.

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Figure 1



A photograph of a handwritten letter on lined paper. The handwriting is in cursive and appears to be from a child. The letter is written on a piece of paper with horizontal lines. The text of the letter is as follows:

Dear Mom and Dad,  
 I feel that you two are the  
 best parents ever! you smart,  
 you know how to cook, you know how  
 to make things, you have taken  
 care of me for the last 9 years.  
 I'm happy for it!!

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Much more can be learned from understanding the social worlds of our students and using them as opportunities to explore their social,

cultural, and literate roles and possibilities. If our goal in education is to foster independent learning and critical thinking, then we need to understand our children's perspectives and invite them to explore their world, community, and family in school. As I listen to Sam's voice in his letter to his parents, I am reminded to consider the possibilities for involving who and what really counts in his world (See Figure 1).

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