

DISCOURSES,  
SOCIO-CULTURALLY SITUATED EDUCATIONAL THEORY,  
AND THE FAILURE PROBLEM\*

BY

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Neither in-born, nor cultural differences can account for the fact that some children succeed in our schools and others do not. All children, apart from serious handicapping conditions, have the biological and cultural foundations to prosper in the face of the intellectual demands made by schools (Chomsky, 1975; Gee, 1985, 1986, 1989a; Heath, 1983). In the normal course of linguistic, social, and cognitive development, children regularly carry out tasks that are as complex as any schools demand (Hickman, 1987; Rogoff & Lave, 1984; Vygotsky, 1987; Wertsch, 1985a). And yet children from certain minority and lower socio-economic groups disproportionately fail in school (Trueba, 1989). Since these groups have the least power in our society, this failure ensures that schools, though ostensibly democratic institutions, replicate the status quo of the social hierarchy. I take this problem-- which I will call for brief reference, "the failure problem"--to be the leading intellectual and ethical problem of educational theory.

Too often we take for granted the paradoxical nature of the failure problem. Something of this paradox can be seen clearly if we consider for a moment the Bristol Language Project in Great Britain, a longitudinal study of the language development of a representative sample of children born in the Bristol area in the years 69-70 and 71-72 (Wells, 1981; 1985a, b; 1986a, b, c). The school success of these children at age 10 was found to be

children's preparedness for literacy upon entry to school as judged by a "Test of Knowledge of Literacy" given at age five. The results of this test, in turn, related directly to early literacy practices in the home (e.g., story book reading), practices taking place long before the age of five. Finally, both these practices and the results of "The Test of Knowledge of Literacy" related most directly to the children's social class. If the children's early home-based preparedness for literacy is still strongly predicting their success in school at age ten, then school itself is not having much of an impact, save "to make the rich richer and the poor poorer". Current research coming out of the project continues to show the same picture even in regard to foreign language instruction: the success of these children at age 14 in foreign language classes correlates quite highly with their family backgrounds, e.g., social class and parental education (Skehan, 1986, 1989).

"The Test of Knowledge of Literacy" tests for the sorts of knowledge that early literacy practices in middle class homes appear to give children: namely, "greater familiarity with the language of books ... the concept of a story ... important 'book skills' such as knowledge of print orientation (top-bottom and left-right) and page turning; and perhaps most importantly, [the knowledge] that meaning [can] be extracted from the printed page", to use the words of a recent introduction to the development of literacy in children (Garton & Pratt, 1989). The paradox here is, of

- course, that if this is the sort of knowledge with which later success in school correlates, then surely ANY child could be given this upon entry to school in a relatively rapid way. We are hardly talking a major level of cognitive achievement here, but rather the sorts of achievements that are the mainstay of the normal development of any child, barring major handicapping conditions. That such a trivial head start can spell out to years of disproportionate success is truly astounding, especially when work on child development indicates that children who are deprived of certain necessary developmental stages for basic social and linguistic skills quickly make up for this loss if given the opportunity a bit later (de Villiers & de Villiers, 1978).

The paradox here only deepens when we consider explanations for "the large individual differences in language skills that children exhibit in the preschool period" like the following one, from the same introductory book I cited above: "The parents in higher socio-economic groups tend to value language more highly than those in lower socio-economic groups and other cultures" (Garton & Pratt, 1989, p. 55). There is, perhaps, no group of Americans whose high regard for and exemplary skill in language has been more fully documented than Black Americans (Labov, 1972a). Many American Indian groups have an equally acute regard for and skill with language (Todorov, 1982; Sherzer, 1983). Research indicates that many bilingual people have deeper insight than monolinguals into language

(140)

differences and the functioning of language in society (Finnegan, 1988). Yet Black children, native American children, and Spanish-English bilingual children disproportionately fail in school. That explanations like this one get printed in reputable introductory books is a sign, I would argue, that our thinking on the failure problem is seriously awry.

It is often claimed that the key to understanding the failure problem lies in the notion of "decontextualized" language and thought (Olson, Torrance, Hildyard, 1985). It is said that children from minority and lower socio-economic homes, though sophisticated in some language practices, do not learn to use and think in terms of language that is "decontextualized", abstracted away from an immediate context of social interaction, mutually shared knowledge, and the here and now (as written and school-based language is). This sounds good, but has turned out to be something of a "burst bubble" as explanations go. No one has satisfactorily figured out what "decontextualized" actually means, current literary theory stresses that there is no such thing as "decontextualized" language (Birch, 1989; Cohan & Shires, 1988; Stahl, 1989), and work on child development (Griffiths, 1986) has shown that all children's early interactions are heavily tied to mutually known and shared contexts in the here and now. "Decontextualized language and thought" seems to be no more than a fancy term for the sorts of language and thought that schools reward--

whatever these turn out to be--and claims about "decontextualization" appear to amount to little more than the circular claim that failing to have school-based skills (whatever they are) ensures you fail in school. It turns out, also, that when young middle class white children are asked to tell a story, they often interpret this to mean a chronologically-based "report", faithful to "the facts" of the experienced event (like a newspaper), while lower socio-economic Black children interpret it to mean a "fanciful tale that mixes experience and fiction in performative language (like a play)" (Michaels, 1981; Heath, 1983)--and yet the white child is supposed to be the one given to "decontextualization". This seems to me yet another paradox.

I do not believe we are going to make substantive progress on the failure problem, nor on a viable educational theory, unless we question several related "commonsense" assumptions inherited from the discipline of psychology. While these assumptions appear "obvious", I believe they are, in fact, false, or, at least, seriously misleading. Three of these assumptions are as follows:

1. Thinking and speaking are functions of individual "minds".
2. Literacy is an individual mental skill involving the ability to read and write.
3. Intelligence, knowledge, and aptitude are states of individual minds.

In line with these assumptions, the failure problem becomes a problem that resides within individuals, and we look for the solution to the problem in terms of what is going on inside individuals' minds, what skills they have failed to obtain, and how they can acquire them. These skills are rather like money, something that individual's "own" and keep in their own private bank accounts. This approach, of course, has the advantage, for those with a vested interest in replicating the current social hierarchy, that it keeps us from situating the problem in, and seriously changing, the institutions (schools) and the society that perpetuates it.

I cannot, in the short time I have, fully make the case for an socio-culturally situated educational theory that would deny the above assumptions. What I hope I can do, though, is suggest, through an analysis of a couple of examples of children making sense, what such an educational theory might look like, and on what sorts of issues it would focus. Such a theory would replace the three "commonsense" assumptions above with the socialized and historicized versions below:

1. Thinking and speaking are functions of social groups (whether communities like lower socio-economic urban Blacks or specialized groups like churches, classrooms, or literary critics) and their specific "Discourses", where by "Discourse" I mean a distinctive and integrated way of thinking, acting, interacting, talking, and valuing connected with a particular social identity or role, and with its own unique history, and often with its own distinctive "props" (buildings, objects, spaces, schedules, books, etc.).
2. Literacy is a social skill involving the ability to take a functional part in one or more of a given social group's "Discourses" when these Discourses involve written language in some way.
3. A good part of "knowledge" (what people have a right to claim to know) resides not in their "minds", but in the Discourses of the social groups they belong to. Intelligence and aptitude, as measured by tests, are artificially constructed measures of aspects of social practices taken out of context and attributed to individuals.

I will, a bit later, exemplify, through an analysis of two examples of language used by young children, the perspective represented by these revised assumptions. But first, to set the context for this analysis, I need to briefly discuss a view of development and learning compatible with a socio-culturally situated educational theory. The view of development I take stresses the social nature of the mind, and the way in which we learn to think and feel in and through the groups we belong to and value (Vygotsky, 1987; Wertsch, 1985b). It sees learning as a form of apprenticeship to the expertise of caregivers and slightly older peers (Smith, 1988). Just as in the case of apprentice craftsmen, children as apprentices carry out



tasks with "masters" in a supported environment, tasks they could not, in fact, do by themselves.

In all cultures, caregivers and/or slightly older peers engage children in predictable and fairly fixed interactional routines or rituals--what Jerome Bruner has called formats (Bruner, 1973, 1977, 1983, 1986). These formats differ, of course, from culture to culture (Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986). In large parts of middle class culture in the U.S., where there is an emphasis on early mother-child interactions, an initial routine may be as simple as the parent responding to a child's sound or action as if it was meaningful. The child smiles and the mother says "Oh what a nice smile!"; the child makes a noise and the mother says, "There's a nice noise!". The parent is making the child a conversational partner when the child cannot yet talk. Or the parent places the child on her knee and says "giddy up!" and bounces the child. The parent stops and says "giddy up!" again and bounces the child again. Eventually the child makes a sound when the parent stops, and the parent treats it as "giddy up!" and bounces the child. The child has here come to fill a slot in the interaction, a slot originally supplied by the parent, and then interpreted by the parent to be the appropriate response. Later interactions around book reading take much the same form: the child is asked "What's that?", or "What's that say?", or "What's he doing?", with the caregiver initially supplying an answer, later accepting a wide array

(45)

of answers, and eventually expecting a specific answer in a specific form. The caregiver often models the behavior desired, actively scaffolds the emerging behavior as the child attempts it, shaping and reshaping it in the process, and, finally, comments on, or otherwise extends the behavior when it is done, allowing the child to contextualize the behavior in wider cognitive, linguistic, or interactional patterns (Cazden, 1983, 1988; Garton & Pratt, 1989; Snow, 1986).

While different cultural groups have different practices, they all have forms of supported social interaction in which children are allowed to accomplish social and cognitive tasks that they could not do by themselves and do not fully understand by themselves. For example, although Kaluli mothers in Papua-New Guinea do not provide their children with the sorts of semantic expansions characteristic of middle class mothers in the U.S., they engage in a considerable amount of direct language modeling, with instructions to children to imitate the model supplied (Schieffelin, 1979, 1984). The utterances presented for imitation are meant to be used by the child for carrying out effective social interaction, and they are not simplified or otherwise adapted to the child's language level. The parent insists only that the child utter such models, not that she necessarily comprehend them. For example, when a five-year-old Kaluli child named Beinalia took too much food, her mother said to her 27-month old brother Wanu "Whose is it?"

Say like that", and Wanu then said "Whose is it?". The mother then said "Is it yours? say like that", and Wanu said "Is it yours?", and so on for several more turns (conversation cited in Ochs & Schieffelin, 1984, and Snow, 1986). Wanu may not have fully understood what he was saying, but--as in our examples of rituals and routines above--he was being inserted into a social interaction in a way that supported him and rendered him successful beyond his abilities on his own.

These early and very simple routines exemplify what is, I would argue, a crucial characteristic of most development and learning throughout life. It is by just such methods, at a suitably more mature level, that one produces apprentice carpenters, new drivers, competent writers, and graduate students. A linguist doesn't learn to be a linguist all by herself, nor even by reading books and going to classes. Rather faculty and peers, and later colleagues and journals, apprentice her through a variety of interactions in which certain types of language, certain modes of interaction, and certain attitudes and values are modeled and supported, even when they but barely exist in the student. For example, a good grant or journal reviewer often treats a beginner's work as if it has a more coherent argument and more sophisticated style than in reality it has. The final article often incorporates views, attitudes, assumptions, and pieces of style from reviewers, teachers, and colleagues in such a way that the article is as much a

"group work" as the individual product of the student, though we don't treat it as such in our culture. As a matter of fact, if it does not have this "group feel" to it, it will not usually get published, since it will not be recognizable as linguistics, or, at least, as linguistics written by a linguist, to the community of people who constitute linguistics, or a sub-part of linguistics at a particular time and place (Douglas, 1986; Graff, 1987; Holton, 1973).

This view of development--that is, development as apprenticeship--leads us to reconsider what it is people are learning when they are serving as apprentices, and what they are teaching when they are serving as "masters". In particular, people are not learning and teaching skills, though apprentices are often "picking up" skills as a concomitant to the apprenticeship process. When a parent asks a young child "What's that?" of a picture in a picture book, the parent is not, in fact, trying to teach the child (the skills of) how to answer "what questions". Rather, this is merely a small part of what the parent does with the child in order to introduce the child into a characteristic (socially and culturally specific) way of doing things, into a particular form of life (Wittgenstein, 1958), in this case, how people "like us" approach books (talk about, read, value, use, and integrate them with other activities).

More generally, apprenticeships are always apprenticeships into what I call "Discourses" (with a

capital "D", see Gee, 1987, 1989b, c). The notion of "Discourse" is meant to give us a way of focusing on integrated units of language, interaction, action, beliefs and values, and not just language itself. "Language" is, in fact, a misleading term. For one thing, it too often suggests "grammar". It is a truism that a person can know the grammar of a language perfectly and not know how to use that language. It is not just what you say, but how you say it. I don't say something like "May I have a match please?" to my tattooed drinking buddy in his leather jacket, despite the fact that it's grammar is impeccable. Rather, I would say something like "Got a match?". However, it is less often remarked that a person could be able to use a language perfectly and still not make sense. It is not just how you say it, but what you are and what you do when you say it. If I say to my same tattooed drinking buddy, as I sit down at the bar, "Got a match?", while placing a napkin on the bar stool to avoid getting my newly pressed designer jeans dirty, I have indeed said the right thing in the right way, but my "saying-doing" combination is nonetheless all wrong.

At any moment we are using language we must say or write the right thing in the right way while playing the right social role and (appearing) to hold the right values, beliefs, and attitudes. Thus, what is important is not language, and surely not grammar, but saying(writing)-doing-being-valuing-believing combinations. These combinations I call "Discourses". Discourses are ways of being in the

(111)

world, or forms of life which integrate words, acts, values, beliefs, attitudes, social identities, as well as gestures, glances, body positions, and clothes.

A Discourse is a sort of "identity kit" which comes complete with the appropriate costume and instructions on how to act, talk, and often write, so as to take on a particular role that others will recognize. Being "trained" as a linguist meant that I learned to speak, think, and act like a linguist, and to recognize others when they do so. Some other examples of Discourses: (enacting) being an American or a Russian, a man or a woman, a member of a certain socioeconomic class, a factory worker or a boardroom executive, a doctor or a hospital patient, a teacher, an administrator, or a student, a student of physics or a student of literature, a member of a sewing circle, a club, a street gang, a lunchtime social gathering, or a regular at a local bar (Gee, 1987; Macdonell, 1986).

I have argued above that the result of apprenticeships (that is, of the most characteristic form of human learning) is a Discourse. And, I would equally argue that Discourses (and we are all members of many) are only acquired by and through a process of apprenticeship. It turns out that much that is claimed, controversially, to be true of second language acquisition or socially situated cognition (Beebe, 1988; Dulay, Burt & Krashen, 1982; Grosjean, 1982; Krashen, 1982, 1985a, b; Krashen & Terrell, 1983; Lave, 1988; Rogoff & Lave, 1984) is, in fact, more obviously true of the

acquisition of Discourses. Discourses are not mastered by overt instruction (even less so than languages, and hardly anyone ever acquired a second language sitting in a classroom), but by enculturation ("apprenticeship") into social practices through scaffolded and supported interaction with people who have already mastered the Discourse (Heath, 1983; Cazden, 1988).

I will now turn to the analysis of two texts, an analysis that is meant to exemplify in a concrete fashion the socio-culturally situated approach to development, learning, and education that I have been proposing. While this analysis will not itself, of course, solve the failure problem, it will, I believe, point towards new approaches to the problem. The first text is a "sharing time" story told at school by a seven year lower socio-economic Black girl (Gee, 1985; Michaels, 1981). This girl is now in her early teens, and she has not been particularly successful at school-based literacy (Gee, 1989a). The second text is by a five year old middle class girl--the girl is reading a book, though she cannot, in fact, "really" read (Gee, 1989b). As will be obvious she knows more about reading than many older children who can "really read".

Below I reprint the Black child's sharing time story, which I call "Cakes". While "sharing time" stories are normally told while the teacher is in the classroom, in this case the teacher had been called out and the child simply told the story to her peers. This child's "sharing time"

stories were not viewed as successful by her teachers, who thought she "rambled", "exaggerated", "contradicted herself", moved from topic to topic just to extend her turn, and was sometimes "confused". We know from research by Sarah Michaels and her colleagues (Michaels, 1981, 1985; Michaels & Cazden, 1986; Michaels & Collins, 1984; Collins & Michaels, 1986; Michaels & Cook-Gumperz, 1979), that, during "sharing time", teachers are listening for stories that are organized quite differently than the stories Black children often tell. Thus, in a sense, teachers fail to "hear" the stories Black children are actually telling (and hear, instead, "disorganized" versions of the stories they are listening for). The stories that many middle class children tell, and which teachers are listening for, are organized in a linear, chronological, reportive fashion typical of a number of these children's home-based language practices. Black children's stories also link to various home-based practices, but different ones, ones the school knows (and often cares) little about. In fact, the stories Black children tell are embedded in a very rich and historically very old context of specific verbal practices in Black culture (Abrahams, 1964, 1970, 1976; Baugh, 1983; Gee, 1985, 1989a; Jackson, 1974; Kochman, 1972, 1981; Rosenberg, 1970; Smitherman, 1977; Stucky, 1987).

I reprint the story in terms of "lines and stanzas". In other work (Gee, 1985, 1986, 1989b; see also Chafe, 1980; Hymes, 1981; Scollon & Scollon, 1981; Tedlock, 1977), I have

(15)



argued that all speech is produced in terms of lines (often a clause long) and stanzas (a small group of lines with one perspective and a narrow topic). I will not here detail how, psycholinguistically, lines and stanzas are found in a text (see Gee, 1986). While all speech is produced in lines and stanzas, different cultures and social groups organize language within stanzas in different and culturally distinctive ways. The story is as follows:

CAKES

FRAME

STANZA 1

1. Today
2. it's Friday the 13th
3. an' it's bad luck day
4. an' my grandmother's birthday is on bad luck day

PART 1: : MAKING CAKES

STANZA 2

5. an' my mother's bakin a cake
6. an' I went up my grandmother's house while my mother's bakin' a cake
7. an' my mother was bakin' a cheese cake
8. my grandmother was bakin a whipped cream cup cakes

STANZA 3

9. an' we bof went over my mother's house
10. an' then my grandmother had made a chocolate cake
11. an' then we went over my aunt's house
12. an' she had make a cake

STANZA 4

13. an' everybody had made a cake for nana
14. so we came out with six cakes

PART 2: GRANDMOTHER EATS CAKES

STANZA 5

15. last night
16. my grandmother snuck out
17. an' she ate all the cake
18. an' we hadda make more

STANZA 6

(she knew we was makin' cakes)

19. an' we was sleepin'
20. an' she went in the room
21. an' gobbled em up
22. an' we hadda bake a whole bunch more

STANZA 7

23. she said mmmm
24. she had all chocolate on her face, cream, strawberries
25. she said mmmm
26. that was good

STANZA 8

27. an' then an' then all came out
28. an' my grandmother had ate all of it
29. she said "what's this cheese cake doin' here"-- she didn't like cheese cakes
30. an' she told everybody that she didn't like cheese cakes

STANZA 9

31. an' we kept makin' cakes
32. an' she kept eatin' 'em
33. an' we finally got tired of makin' cakes
34. an' so we all ate 'em

PART 3: GRANDMOTHER GOES OUTSIDE THE HOME  
NON-NARRATIVE SECTION (35-41)

STANZA 10

35. an' now
36. today's my grandmother's birthday
37. an' a lot o'people's makin' a cake again
38. but my grandmother is goin t'get her own cake at her bakery
39. an' she's gonna come out with a cake
40. that we didn't make
41. cause she likes chocolate cream

STANZA 11

42. an' I went t'the bakery with her
43. an' my grandmother ate cup cakes
44. an' an' she finally got sick on today
45. an' she was growling like a dog cause she ate so many cakes

FRAME

STANZA 12

46. an' I finally told her that it was
47. it was Friday the thirteenth bad luck day

Laid out in terms of its lines and stanzas the overall organization of the text is readily apparent. The text is in three parts: Part 1 about baking cakes, Part 2 about the grandmother eating up the cakes, and Part 3 about the grandmother getting her own cakes at the bakery. Just before the close of the story, in stanza 10, the child engages in some non-narrative, expository material. This is typical of the child's story telling: she often places such material right before her final narrative stanza (see Gee, 1985, 1989a). Such material has what William Labov has called an "evaluative" role (Labov, 1972b), that is, it signals what in the story teller's view makes the story "tellable", "significant", or "interesting".

The style of the language of the text is also fairly obvious, and recognizably part of a Black cultural tradition. The child uses language in a "poetic", rather than a "prosaic" way; she tries to "involve" the audience, rather than just to "inform" them (Nichols, 1989). She uses a good deal of syntactic parallelism, repetition, and sound devices to set up rhythmic and poetic patterning within and across her stanzas. For example, stanzas 2 and 3 have the sort of structuring I have diagrammed below:

STANZA 2

|    |                    |             |       |          |
|----|--------------------|-------------|-------|----------|
| 1. |                    | my mother's | bakin | a cake   |
| 2. | my grandmother's   | my mother's | bakin | a cake   |
| 3. |                    | my mother   | bakin | a X cake |
| 4. | my grandmother was |             | bakin | a X cake |

STANZA 3

|    |    |                   |                        |
|----|----|-------------------|------------------------|
| 1. | we |                   | went over my X's house |
| 2. |    | Y had made a cake |                        |
| 3. | we |                   | went over my Z's house |
| 4. |    | Z had made a cake |                        |

Stanza 6 repeats line by line, with different language, the content of stanza 5; stanza 8 is just a "different take" on the same episode enacted by stanza 7. Stanza 4 is a two line summary of all of part 1, while stanza 9 is a four line summary of all of part 2. We can see clearly in stanza 2 that the child is working with structural formats. In this stanza she is working with the pattern: "... bakin a cake / ... bakin a cake / ... bakin a TYPE of cake / ... bakin a TYPE of cake". But the last line involves a plural (cup cakes) and thus can't take the indefinite singular article "a". The girl, driven by the pattern, uses "a" anyway, a "speech error" that gives us some insight into the schema-like patterns that are helping to drive production and that are freeing her to invest cognitive energy in creating meaning and building larger patterns throughout the text as a whole.

Clearly the narrator here is not primarily interested in making rapid and linear progress to "the point". Rather, she is interested in creating a pattern out of language, within and across her stanzas, much like a painting or a poem, a pattern which will generate meaning through the sets of relationships and contrasts which it sets up, like the multiple relationships and contrasts, points of contact and stress, in a painting or a poem (Frank, 1963).

And what might that meaning be? Of course, there are always multiple plausible interpretations of a text (and many non-plausible ones as well). But if we follow the clues or guides the child has placed in the organization of her text, and are sensitive to the child's culture, we can offer a "reading" that accepts the invitations of her text. The non-narrative "evaluative" section in stanza 10 suggests that there is something significant in the fact that the grandmother is going to get a cake at the bakery and thus "come out with a cake that we [the family] didn't make". And, indeed, the story as a whole places a great deal of emphasis on the production of cakes within the family, a production that doesn't cease even when the grandmother keeps eating them. The grandmother, the matriarch and repository of the culture's norms, is behaving like a child, sneaking out and eating the cakes and rudely announcing that she doesn't like "cheese cake" even though the cake has been made by her relatives for her birthday. It must intrigue the child narrator that the grandmother can behave this way

and, far from getting in trouble, the family simply makes more cakes. Surely the story carries some messages about family loyalty and respect for age. But it also, I would argue, raises a problem: the matriarch, the guardian of culturally normative behavior, is behaving in such a way as to violate the home and culture's canons of polite behavior. What might the sanctions be for such a violation? And what is the deeper meaning of the grandmother's violation? Like all real stories, this one raises real problems, problems that the story attempts to resolve (in large part through its structure) in a satisfying manner.

We can get to this deeper level of the text, if we consider the constant use of and play on the word "cake" in the story. The story, in fact, contains a humorous paradox about cakes: the grandmother eats innumerable (normal sized) cakes at home, made by her relatives, and never gets sick. Then she goes outside the home, buys little cakes ("cup cakes") at the bakery, and, not only does she get sick, she "growls like a dog", that is, loses her human status and turns into an animal. Why?

What I would argue is this: the grandmother is learning, and the child narrator is enacting, a lesson about signs or symbols. A birthday cake is a material object, but it is also an immaterial sign or symbol of kinship, when made within the family--a celebration of birth and family membership. The cake at the bakery looks the same, but it is a duplicitous symbol--it is not actually a sign of

kinship, rather it is a commodity that non-kin have made to sell, not to celebrate the birth of someone they care about. To mistake the baker's cake as a true symbol of birth and kin is to think, mistakenly, that signs have meaning outside the contexts that give them meaning (Birch, 1989; Hodge & Kress, 1987; Stahl, 1989). In the context of the family, the cake means kinship and celebration; in the context of the bakery and market society, it signals exchange and commodities. The grandmother, in her greed, overvalues the material base of the sign (its cakehood) and misses its meaning, undervaluing the network of kin that gives meaning to the cakes. This is particularly dangerous when we consider that the grandmother is a senior representative of the family and culture. Her penalty is to momentarily lose her human status, that is, the status of a giver and taker of symbolic meaning--she becomes an animal, merely an eater. We may remember Levi-Strauss's claim that to many cultures, the material world is not only "good to eat", but "good to think with" (Levi-Strauss, 1966). The grandmother's behavior and its consequences are the product of fate--it's Friday the 13th, bad luck day--rooted in the "nature" of things, not merely a matter of social conventions (a view shared by all cultures (Taussig, 1987), as far as I can see, including our schools, which take their literacy practices to be "ahistorical", "natural", and "inevitable", practices people can fail at only if they are "deprived" (Street, 1984)).

(11.7)



And now, of course, I must face the inevitable question: could this seven year old really have meant this? Could she really have this sophisticated a theory of signs? I would argue that these questions seem so compelling to us because we have a much less good theory of signs than this child has. We think meaning is a matter of privatized intentions locked in people's heads and indicative of their individual "intelligence" or "skill". But once we deny this view of meaning, the questions lose most of their force; in fact, they become somewhat odd.

This little girl has inherited, by her apprenticeship in the Discourses of her community, ways of making sense of experience that, in fact, have a long and rich history going back thousands of years. This enculturation/apprenticeship has given her certain forms of language, ranging from devices at the word and clause level, through the stanza level, to the story level as a whole, forms of language which are intimately connected to forms of life. These forms of language are not merely structural, rather they encapsulate, carry through time and space, meaning, meanings shared by and lived out in a variety of ways by the social group. The girl speaks the language, engages in the Discourse, and gets the meanings "free": she is a "carrier" of the Discourse. It is a good performance, indeed, and it should be: the little girl is apprenticed to a group that has been working on it for hundreds of years (Finnegan, 1970; Foley, 1988). It's just a shame that it doesn't

"sell" in our schools, which unfortunately accept a view of signs much closer to the grandmother's momentary lapse.

Our next text exemplifies much the same point, save for the fact that the sort of socio-culturally situated practice in which this girl engages is directly linked to school success. To make sense of the text, I need to tell you something of its context. A young middle class mother regularly reads story books to both her five and seven year old daughters. Her five year old has had a birthday party, which has had some problems. In the next few days the five year old has told several relatives about the birthday party, reporting the events in her "normal" story form (which is basically a chronological report of the facts). A few days later, when the mother is reading a story book to her seven year old, the five year old says she wants to "read" (though she can not decode print), and pretends, while holding a book, to be reading, telling what had happened at her birthday party. Her original attempt at this is not very good, but eventually after a few tries, interspersed with the mother reading to the other girl, the five year old produces the following story, which is not in the language of her "normal" story form. I print the text in its lines and stanzas:

(162)

STANZA ONE (Introduction)

1. This is a story
2. About some kids who were once friends
3. But got into a big fight
4. And were not

STANZA TWO (Frame: Signalling of Genre)

5. You can read along in your story book
6. I'm gonna read aloud

[story-reading prosody from now on]

STANZA THREE (Title)

7. "How the Friends Got Unfriend"

STANZA FOUR (Setting: Introduction of Characters)

8. Once upon a time there was three boys 'n three girls
9. They were named Berry Lou, Pallis, and Parshin, were the girls
10. And Michael, Jason, and Aaron were the boys
11. They were friends

STANZA FIVE (Problem: Sex Differences)

12. The boys would play Transformers
13. And the girls would play Cabbage Patches

STANZA SIX (Crisis: Fight))

14. But then one day they got into a fight on who would be which team
15. It was a very bad fight
16. They were punching
17. And they were pulling
18. And they were banging

STANZA SEVEN (Resolution 1: Storm)

19. Then all of a sudden the sky turned dark
20. The rain began to fall
21. There was lightning going on
22. And they were not friends

STANZA EIGHT (Resolution 2: Mothers punish)

23. Then um the mothers came shooting out 'n saying
24. "What are you punching for?"
25. You are going to be punished for a whole year"

STANZA NINE (Frame)

26. The end
27. Wasn't it fun reading together?
28. Let's do it again
29. Real soon!

The books that are part of the story-book reading episodes surrounding this child's oral text encode language that is part of several specific Discourses connected to schools. These include, of course, "children's literature", but also "literature" proper. Children's books use linguistic devices that are simplified analogues of "literary" devices used in traditional, canonical "high literature". These devices are often thought to be natural and universal to literary art, though they are not. Many of them have quite specific origins in quite specific historical circumstances (though some of them ARE rooted in universals of sense making and are devices that occur in non-literary talk and writing as well). One device with a quite specific historical reference is the so-called "sympathetic fallacy". This is where a poem or story treats natural events (e.g., sunshine or storms) as if they reflected or were "in harmony" or "in step" with (sympathetic with) human events and emotions. This device was a hallmark of 19th century Romantic poetry, though it is common in more recent poetry as well.

Notice how in the five year old's story the sympathetic fallacy is not only used, but is, in fact, the central organizing device in the construction of the story. The fight between the girls and boys in Stanza 6 is immediately followed in Stanza 7 by the sky turning dark, with lightning flashing, and thence in line 22: "and they were not friends". Finally, in Stanza 8, the mothers come on the

(11.4)

scene to punish the children for their transgression. The sky is "in tune" or "in step" with human happenings. The function of the sympathetic fallacy in "high literature" is to equate the world of nature (the macrocosm) with the world of human affairs (the microcosm) as it is depicted in a particular work of art. It also suggests that these human affairs, as they are depicted in the work of literary art, are "natural", part of the logic of the universe, rather than conventional, historical, cultural, or class-based.

In the five year old's story, the sympathetic fallacy functions in much the same way as it does in "high literature". In particular, the story suggests that gender differences (Stanza 4: boy versus girl) are associated with different interests (Stanza 5: Transformers versus Cabbage Patches), and that these different interests inevitably lead to conflict when male and female try to be "equal" or "one" or sort themselves on other grounds than gender (Stanza 6: "a fight on who would be which team"). The children are punished for transgressing gender lines (Stanza 8), but only after the use of the sympathetic fallacy (in Stanza 7) has suggested that division by gender, and the conflicts which transgressing this division lead to, are sanctioned by nature, are "natural" and "inevitable", not merely conventional or constructed in the very act of play itself.

Notice, then, how the very form and structure of the language, and the linguistic devices used, carry meaning, a particular ideological message, that cannot be separated

from that form and structure. In mastering this aspect of this Discourse, the little girl has unconsciously "swallowed whole", ingested, a whole system of thought, embedded in the very linguistic devices she uses. This, by the way, is another example, of how linguistic aspects of Discourses can never be isolated from non-linguistic aspects, like values, assumptions, and beliefs. Like the Black child above, this girl has acquired, through apprenticeship, forms of language (connected to a form of life, a Discourse) that allow her to "mean" beyond herself as an individual.

Let's consider how this text relates to our theory of Discourse. The child had started by telling a story about her birthday, to various relatives, over a couple of days, presumably in her home-based, primary Discourse. Then, on a given day, in the course of repeated book reading episodes, she reshapes this story into another genre. She incorporates aspects of the book reading episode into her story. Note, for example, the introduction in Stanza 1, the Frame in Stanza 2, the title in Stanza 3, and then the start of the story proper in Stanza 4. She closes the Frame in Stanza 9. Note as well the "literary" syntax of the story (e.g., stanza 4). This overall structure and style shapes the text into "story book reading", though, in fact, there is no book and the child can't read (traditional accounts of literacy are going to have deep conceptual problems here, because they trouble themselves too much over things like books and decoding, and not enough over social practices).

(1.1.1)

Supported by her mother and older sister, our five year old is mastering the Discourse of "story book reading". But this Discourse is itself an aspect of apprenticeship in another, more mature Discourse, namely "literature" (as well as, in other respects, "essayist Discourse", but that is another story). This child, when she goes to school to begin her more public apprenticeship into the Discourse of literature, will look like a "quick study" indeed. It will appear that her success was inevitable given her native intelligence and verbal abilities. Her success was inevitable, indeed, but because of her earlier apprenticeship. Note too how her mastery of this "story book reading" Discourse leads to the incorporation of a set of values and attitudes (about gender and the naturalness of middle class ways of behaving) that are shared by many other dominant Discourses in our society. This will facilitate the acquisition of other dominant Discourses, ones that may, at first, appear quite disparate from "literature" or "story book reading".

It is also clear that the way in which this girl's home experience interpellates her primary, home-based Discourse (the original tellings of the story to various relatives) and more public, dominant (school-based) Discourses will cause transfer of features from the public Discourse to the primary one (thanks to the fact, for instance, that this is all going on at home in the midst of primary socialization). Indeed, it is just such episodes that are the locus of the

process by which dominant Discourses filter from public life into private life.

It is equally pointless to ask of our five year old's story, as it was of the Black child's, whether she really "meant" or "intended" it in the sophisticated fashion we have interpreted it. The Discourses to which she is apprenticed "speak" through her (to other Discourses, in fact). So, she can, in fact, "speak" quite beyond herself (much like, "speaking in tongues", I suppose). Further, the little girl ingests an ideology whole here, so to speak, and not in any way in which she could analyze it, verbalize it, or critique it.

Comparing the former story by the Black girl and the latter one by the white girl, we can notice a paradox that has been commented on before (Gee, 1985, 1989a; Heath, 1983): the white girl uses certain linguistic devices (e.g., parallelism and repetition within and across her stanzas) as part of an emerging literary Discourse that are not part of her primary, home-based narrative practices (which tend to be "reportive"), but which are part of the primary home-based narrative practices of the Black child (who then goes on to fail in school to master middle class, school-based literary Discourse practices!).

To conclude then: Due to their apprenticeships in Discourses, children, and, indeed, adults too, think and mean beyond themselves. Each human being thinks and means in a variety of different ways because of his or her

(11.8)



apprenticeships in a variety of different Discourses. In the framework I have developed here, the failure problem is recast as the question as to why certain groups of people are denied apprenticeships in certain dominant Discourses. And this question radiates out into a number of other questions: Why have certain Discourses become dominant? Why have other ones failed, as of yet, to successfully, resist their domination? Why have schools, under the sway of the psychological model, failed to see their role as sites of apprenticeship? How can schools become sites of apprenticeship? And, perhaps the most important question of all for our human future, how can we all liberate ourselves from forms of life that ultimately constrict our dignity as human beings? For example, how can we liberate ourselves from those aspects of dominant Discourses that have for so long led us to believe that little Black children (or Indian children, or Chicano children, or poor children, and so on through an unfortunately extensive list) mean less than the sorts of children who succeed in our schools and in our society at large?