

# “Why Do You Write Your Name Long Like That?”

Language and Literacy in a San Francisco Kindergarten



Espen Helgesen

Thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the degree  
'Master of Social Anthropology'  
Department of Social Anthropology  
University of Bergen  
June 2008





## Preface

---

This is an exploration into the social lives of a group of children learning to read and write. Drawing on ethnographic research among twenty 5- and 6-year old kindergartners at a public primary school in San Francisco, USA, my intention is to investigate some of the cognitive and social implications of becoming literate.

I was fortunate enough to be invited to spend the period from January to June 2007 among some truly amazing people in San Francisco. I would like to thank the teachers and other staff members at the school for making my stay both enjoyable and inspiring. Special gratitude goes to the kindergarten teacher, the principal, and the kids' parents and caregivers for their patience and support. I am deeply grateful to the kindergartners, who, in addition to making this thesis possible, have carved a very special place in my heart; I hope they will forgive me for not using their real names. I have received much kindness and support from the staff at the Department of Social Anthropology at the University of Bergen, and I want to thank Gudmund Ågotnes and Rita Kvinge Sortevik in particular. My first supervisor, Dr. Robert G. Minnich, offered thought-provoking comments and questions before and during my fieldwork. My second supervisor, Professor John Chr. Knudsen, has made valuable suggestions after reading early drafts. I thank them both for their guidance. I also want to thank fellow students for their feedback and motivational inputs, and Egill and Rasmus for being such great friends. My parents have been incredibly supportive, and deserve a big hug. Fiona has contributed in a very special way through her sharp readings and thoughtful comments, and by always being there for me. I dedicate this thesis to my brother Erik, who taught me how to play.

Espen Helgesen, June 2008



# Contents

---

PREFACE .....	I
CONTENTS .....	III
CHAPTER 1: THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL APPROACHES.....	1
CONCEPTUALIZING CHILDHOOD .....	1
LANGUAGE SOCIALIZATION.....	7
FRAMING COMMUNICATION .....	11
APPROACHING LITERACY .....	16
CONTEXTUALIZING LITERACY SKILLS.....	21
CHAPTER 2: NAMING PRACTICES.....	26
NAMES IN COMMUNICATION.....	26
”I DON’T HAVE A NAME” .....	30
PLAYING ”MONSTER” AND ”TAG” .....	33
FABRICATIONS .....	37
CONCLUSION.....	39
CHAPTER 3: TEXTUAL LANDMARKS .....	41
”THE GUESSING GAME” .....	41
WORDS AND NAMES.....	46
”DRAWING”, ”WRITING”, AND ”SCRIBBLE SCRABBLE” .....	50
TALKING ABOUT TEXT.....	55
CONCLUSION.....	58
CHAPTER 4: THE LIMITS OF LEGITIMATE LANGUAGE .....	59
”IM ON GRIN” .....	59
”APPRECIATIONS” .....	63
THE VALUE OF WORDS .....	67
”MAGIC WORDS” AND ”BAD WORDS” .....	72
CONCLUSION.....	76
CHAPTER 5: SUMMARY AND SUGGESTIONS .....	78
REFERENCES.....	80



## Chapter 1

# Theoretical and methodological approaches

---

My primary aim in the following chapters is to explore children's use of text, and to investigate some of the social and cognitive implications of becoming literate. Having followed a group of twenty kindergartners as they navigated in and between official and unofficial school worlds, I describe how literacy-related classroom activities were incorporated into the kids' play outside the classroom. I examine the role of language awareness in play and early literacy, and argue that some of the skills acquired when becoming literate can provide resources for manipulating social as well as textual relations.

A central premise is that the study of literacy must take into account the wider context of communication in which reading and writing takes place. This necessarily involves not only the interplay between *modes* of communication, such as language and literacy, but also the co-existence of several *levels* of communication. As will be discussed in detail, a consideration of the kids' uses of personal names allows us to identify some of the overlaps and mutual influences between modes and levels of communication. In this chapter I will outline a few theoretical and methodological contexts, hoping to eliminate some potential ambiguities by discussing key concepts and defining central terms. I will describe how theoretical, ideological, and methodological concerns became intertwined during my ethnographic work, and argue that a consideration of each can illuminate aspects of the others.

## Conceptualizing childhood

From depending on a linear model of development, in which children were conceptualized through an implicit metaphor of growth, many contemporary researchers have become increasingly concerned with understanding how ideas about childhood and adulthood "depend on each other for their meaning" (Jenkins 2004:59). For instance, Helen Schwartzman (1978:20) argues that researchers need to address their own "specific childhood ideology" in order to avoid the tendency to view childhood as opposed to an assumed rational adulthood.

The following pages represent an attempt to avoid some of the pitfalls of academic tradition by examining how children have been conceptualized in earlier research.

Generally speaking, children have been conceptualized in two different ways in academic discourse. Some researchers have approached children as adults-in-the-making, whose activities are seen primarily as reproducing adult knowledge and values (Heath 1983; Ochs 1988). This perspective is dominant among researchers who are concerned with the outcome of socialization processes, and with the cross-cultural comparison of socialization practices. Other researchers have argued that an emphasis on adult-child socialization treats children as passive members of adult culture, and suggest that childhood should be studied as a social construction rather than a life stage (Jenks 1992). William Corsaro (1992), for instance, argues that children's activities should be approached not merely as preparations for their adult lives, but in terms of the immediate relevance of these activities for children themselves. He opposes what he refers to as "the typical adult tendency to try to interpret everything children do as some sort of learning experience" (Corsaro 1992:160-161), and argues that an emphasis on learning inevitably leads us to consider children's activities in terms of a rehearsal for the adult world. Iona and Peter Opie (1992), who collected verses and rhymes from British children during the 1950s, represent a similar view. They found that many of the elements that were exchanged were "not intended for adult ears" (Opie and Opie 1992:173), and therefore passed nearly unchanged through generations of children with little adult intervention. The Opies (1992:174) argue that children enjoy the fact that adults are ignorant of such verses and rhymes, and that the adult world therefore never fully reaches into children's "self-contained community".

Both Corsaro and the Opies point out that many elements of children's activities originate in the adult world, but they deliberately underestimate the influence of adult culture in order to present an alternative to the traditional socialization perspective. In the process, they run the risk of reducing the adult world to a static background, because they tend to ignore the actual influence adults usually have over children. Critics also point out that their eager insistence on the autonomy of children's cultures tends to portray children as a homogeneous group rather than as an internally differentiated category with wide-ranging needs and demands (Gulløv and Højlund 2003:28-29). These arguments serve as a reminder that both Corsaro and the Opies often emphasize the exceptional rather than the general features of children's social lives. In many arenas of life, there is little doubt that children are being influenced directly or indirectly by adults around them. The important question, therefore, is how a balance can be found that represents both children's autonomy and their



dependency on adults. In the following I will turn to my initial impressions and subsequent reconsiderations when I entered the world of the kindergartners, in an attempt to resolve the dilemma of how to conceptualize children as semi-autonomous yet almost inevitably socialized into the world of adults.

When I began my fieldwork in January 2007, the kindergartners had already spent the fall semester together. My arrival was a noticeable change for both the kids and their teachers, and I therefore considered my initial presentation and positioning crucial in gaining access to the peer group. I employed a “reactive method of field entry” (Corsaro 1985:28) during the first few days, allowing the kids to initiate contact with me rather than approaching them directly. I told the kids I was “writing a book” about them, and that I would “write the things you tell me so I don’t forget”. In line with my expressed wish not to be referred to as “teacher”, the kindergarten teacher introduced me to the kids as “a student visiting from Norway”. Both the kindergartners and the school staff employed binary distinctions such as “students” and “teachers” or “kids” and “grown ups” in their interactions, and I was hoping to avoid being considered a “teacher”, even if being seen as a “grown up” appeared inevitable.

During the early stages of my fieldwork, as I followed the kids in their activities in the classroom, the cafeteria, and the school yard, I defined my role primarily as what Anne Haas Dyson (2008:125) has termed “nondirective”. I asked the kids to sort things out among themselves when conflicts occurred, and I pretended to look the other way when rules were broken. In short, I tried to avoid potentially disciplinary actions such as rewarding or punishing the kids. There were times when I considered it necessary to interfere, but I mostly refrained from telling the kids what to do, or from explicitly judging their behavior. I sometimes voiced my opinion if I thought someone was treated badly, but I avoided reporting such incidents to the teacher, as such “telling” seemed to be a highly sensitive issue in the peer group.

As I soon discovered, it was not possible to generalize about the kids’ impressions of me. Despite my concern with establishing myself as a nondirective adult, it was evident that several of the kids associated me with the school staff. Some kids referred to me as “teacher” or “Mister Espen” for several weeks, despite my insistence that they should call me “just Espen”. Even though all the kids eventually referred to me as “Espen”, this is probably due to my repeated insistence, and not necessarily an accurate reflection of their attitude towards me. When I asked for the kids’ approval when making photocopies of their drawings, I was sometimes uncertain about the validity of their approval because they often seemed to comply for the sake of being helpful or polite when adults asked for favours. James Collins and

Richard Blot (2003:45) have pointed out that school children quickly become familiar with teachers' tendency to ask rhetorical questions to which the teacher already knows the answer. I sometimes had the impression that the kids, rather than treating my questions as requests for information, considered them some kind of test to which they were expected to reply appropriately rather than truthfully. Similarly, when kids showed me their toys, illegally smuggled into the classroom, and told me "Don't tell the teacher", I found it difficult to decide whether I should consider this a sign of acceptance, or a test of my loyalty to see if I would respect their secrets or betray their trust.

I regularly spent lunch and recess with the kids rather than with the staff, hoping this would give me access to social arenas not normally accessed by adults. I gradually realized, however, that discipline was far more implicated in adult-child relations than I had initially thought. Status differences such as those between adults and children seem to become magnified in institutions like schools, where relations of unequal power can be reflected even in the physical design of the building. For instance, separate bathrooms for children and adults illustrate how difference was turned into dichotomy, leaving little room for ambiguity by imposing an either-or distinction onto the age continuum. This binary division made it relatively easy for an adult newcomer to enter into a "teacher" role, but seemed to make it correspondingly difficult for a newcomer such as myself to *avoid* being labelled a "teacher". The tendency to see children and adults not simply as different but as opposites is prevalent, it seems, not only in academic discourse, but also in public discourse. Not only was I faced with the difficulty of observing the kids without depending on my own preconceived ideas about childhood; the kids also seemed to define themselves in opposition to adults around them, including myself.

My initial focus on avoiding disciplinary actions did not take into account the fact that discipline was not only transmitted by the actual words or actions being applied in interaction; discipline seemed to be an aspect of the adult-child relation itself. I realized that the kids' perceptions of me were shaped not only in our face-to-face communication, but also by contextual factors that were often outside my control. The reactive and nondirective approach seemed at times to be counterproductive, because my passive attitude did nothing in itself to erase the status differences between the kids and me. I concluded that refraining from using discipline was in itself insufficient, and I began working actively at presenting myself as what Corsaro and Nelson (2003:212) term an "atypical adult".

Many of the kids seemed to consider the classrooms to be dominated by teacher authority. I was therefore careful when interacting with the kids in these spaces, and depended

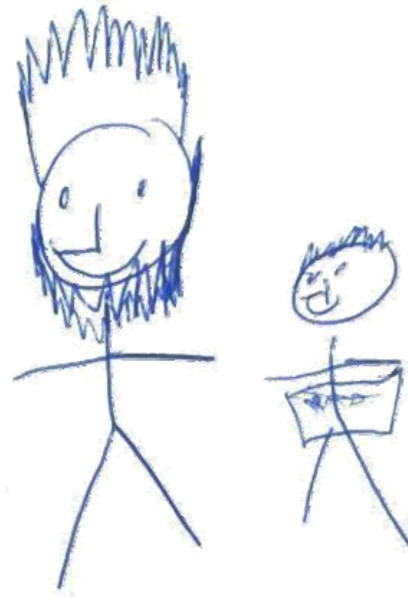


Figure 1: Don's drawing of himself drawing in the ethnographer's notebook.

---

primarily on observations of the kids as long as we were in the classroom. Over time, I was able to pinpoint some of the spaces where status differences seemed less prevalent, such as around the cafeteria table, and on the benches and play structures in the school yard. These contexts seemed less saturated with the authority structure so pervasive in the classrooms. For instance, the kids would sometimes stand up next to me when I was seated on a bench or on the ground in the school yard, and make comments about how they were now “bigger” than me. In addition, I noticed that age-related status differences often seemed to become magnified when more than two people were present, regardless of whether the majority consisted of kids or adults.

Despite my initial decision that I wanted to *do* like the kids even if I could not fully *be* like them (Gulløv and Højlund 2003:62), I believe that the difference in physical size often made it difficult for me to fully participate in the kids' activities. My attempts to minimize status differences, such as by sitting in the kids' chairs, served perhaps to magnify the differences rather than to diminish them, because I looked even bigger than I would have in a regular chair. My size also restricted me from entering certain play areas. Consequently, I was often delegated to a marginal role during the kids' play activities, where my presence would be less obvious and obtrusive. This peripheral position had its advantages, however, as my partial participation made it possible to take notes while simultaneously observing the kids' activities from a close distance.

Even though it was often difficult to tell whether communication was being affected by status differences, I got the impression that many of the kids gradually came to see me as different from other adults in school. For example, during the first week I was the object of much attention around the cafeteria table, and the kids were cautious about playing or talking loudly. After a week, however, the kids were throwing food and squirting milk at each other as if my presence no longer concerned them. I noticed how their behavior now tended to change when other adults approached the table, an indication that the kids had chosen either to accept me or to ignore me. In either case, they no longer seemed concerned that I would “tell the teacher” about their behavior.

Returning now to the initial question of how to conceptualize childhood in terms of both autonomy and dependency, it seems that a flexible theoretical approach is needed. For instance, many classroom activities were administered by the teacher, and can appropriately be described as “priming events” (Corsaro and Molinari 2005), intended to prepare the kids for some hypothesized future. However, even if this provides us with the teacher’s motivation behind introducing word games like “hangman” to the kids, it does little to explain how such activities were perceived by the kindergartners, who seldom seemed concerned with the teacher’s pedagogical intentions. By considering, instead, the teacher’s version of “hangman” to be a potential resource for the kids, it becomes possible to see how the routine was creatively transformed as it was incorporated into the kids’ activities. Following Charles Frake’s (1980:51) suggestion that “context” should be considered a “social accomplishment” rather than a pre-analytic given, ethnographers can switch analytically between considering various factors as serving sometimes as foreground and sometimes as background for each other. Keeping in mind that many activities originated in the official school world, my attention in the following chapters will primarily be on the kids’ practices rather than the adults’ intentions. The systematic switching of contexts allows us to ask whether the kids were successful at what *they* attempted to do, regardless of whether they succeeded according to the teachers’ expectations.

The idea that contexts are flexible and manipulable methodical tools raises the possibility that this may be true not only for ethnographers, but for the kindergartners as well. Erving Goffman (1987) argues that people constantly attempt to find a balance between dependency and autonomy by sometimes embracing and sometimes defying structural expectations. In his words, “without something to belong to, we have no stable self, and yet total commitment and attachment to any social unit implies a kind of selflessness” (Goffman 1987:280). Goffman’s perspective makes it possible to consider how social structures serve

not only to reduce the number of available actions, but also provides resources for social manipulation and expressions of autonomy. In other words, the classroom environment provided structures within which the kids were expected to conform; however, these structures also provided the kids with a number of ways in which they could choose *not* to conform. This issue will be treated in detail in the following chapters, but it is necessary first to turn to a closer treatment of language and literacy.

## Language socialization

It was argued at the outset that research on socialization tends to emphasize the outcome of socialization processes at the expense of children's own experiences. Corsaro (1985:270) offers an attempt to bridge this theoretical gap by suggesting that "socialization theory should also involve an understanding of the life worlds of children". In this perspective, socialization theory is no longer concerned only with children's gradual acquisition of adult values, but also considers children to be "active socializers of others in their environment" (Ochs 1986:2). Rather than a linear developmental path, socialization can therefore be seen as a dialectical and sometimes reciprocal exchange between children, as well as between children and adults. In keeping with my intention to focus primarily on interaction between the kindergartners, the emphasis in Chapter 2 and 3 will be on the implications rather than on the origins of specific socialization practices. Chapter 4, however, turns attention to adult-child socialization, and discusses how particular values were transmitted across social boundaries through routinized language practices.

Elinor Ochs (1988:29) argues that language use should be considered an important aspect of socialization, because "children are acquiring through language a way of viewing the world". She points out that language is both the medium of and the product of socialization, and coins the term "language socialization" to account for how children gradually become familiar with particular social values. Considering the fact that even apparently subversive activities, such as swearing, depend on established communication conventions, it can be argued that all use of language in communication has a conservative aspect to it. This will be discussed in Chapter 4, which addresses the kindergartners' uses of "bad words". It will be argued that even when the kids attempted to evade adults' socializing attempts, they were still being directed towards particular values and world views through language.

Having learnt in advance that the school enrolled students from a variety of immigrant-dominated neighborhoods, and that many of the kids were bilingual, my initial intention was to study the relationship between bilingualism and literacy acquisition. Approximately half of the twenty kids were second-generation immigrants from Central or South America, and most of them spoke Spanish as well as English. The other half came from European, African, Asian, Pacific Islands, and Native American backgrounds, and spoke a variety of languages at home. It therefore came as a surprise to me when I realized that English was used in almost all interaction between the kids at school. Only a few exceptions could be found, such as when the kindergartners talked to older siblings or their parents, or during the weekly two-hour class referred to as “Spanish Music”. Due to the fact that English was used in almost all interaction between the kids, I abandoned my original plan to study bilingualism, and turned my attention instead to the different uses to which English was put.

The school supported, and was directly involved in, a number of programmes and projects intended to improve academic achievement for its students, as well as to improve social and economic conditions in the school’s wider community. Since the 1970s, a number of United States education reforms have addressed what has been termed the “achievement gap” (Sadovnik 2006:196), the discrepancy in education performance between middle and upper class students on the one hand, and working class poor and ethnic minorities on the other hand. A similar structural pattern can be found in many other countries, but the achievement gap is somewhat special in the United States, where, economically speaking, “high-income children are better off than their counterparts in other industrialized nations, while (...) poor children are much worse off than low-income children in almost all other industrialized nations” (Corsaro 1997:217). Many of the kindergartners came from low-income households, as indicated by the fact that more than half of the kids qualified for the federal free or reduced lunch programme.

One of the programmes directly influencing the kids’ daily lives was “TRIBES”, which has been described as “a school-wide instituted programme that purports to build learning communities based on principles of cooperative learning” (Baquedano-Lopez *et al.* 2005:9). By introducing a set of rules, called “The Agreements”, the TRIBES programme is intended to develop a shared language among teachers, students, and parents. These rules involve, among others, “mutual respect”, “appreciation”, “no put downs”, and “right to pass”. The kindergartners were expected to use these terms to resolve disputes among themselves, and their teachers modeled appropriate use of the terms by implementing them in their teaching. Parents were told about the content of the TRIBES programme through formal and

informal meetings with teachers and the school administration. One mother reported that the TRIBES vocabulary had improved communication between herself and her kindergartner, because they now had a “shared language” with which to resolve conflicts. Chapter 4 considers some of the uses of the TRIBES vocabulary among the teachers and the kids.

The school administration also drew inspiration from the Italian “Reggio Emilia” approach to early education, which has been promoted as an alternative to what Donna Davilla and Susan Koenig (1998) term the “industrial/factory model”. Whereas American education, according to Davilla and Koenig (1998:19), treats the child as “a blank slate (...) or an empty vessel ready for knowledge”, Reggio Emilia is said to emphasize active exploration and creative learning. For instance, the Reggio approach encourages teachers to attend to the “multiple languages” of their students, promoting the use of “speech, sketching and sculpture, discussion, movement, photography” as well as other modes of communication (Clyde *et al.* 2006:224).

Even though the Reggio approach had only recently been introduced at the school, a number of Reggio-inspired changes had already been implemented. The library had been redecorated to create the impression of a jungle with wild animals and exotic plants. In the art room, plastic containers had been replaced with glass, guided by the assumption that children should learn how to handle glass with care rather than being shielded from such materials. During staff meetings, the teachers would often address particular issues regarding the implementation of the Reggio approach, in order to make what the principal referred to as a leap “from theory to practice”. For the kindergartners, the impact of the Reggio approach was most notable during the cooperative effort by three teachers to implement what they called “Fun Friday”. Every Friday afternoon, the kids would rotate between work stations in three classrooms to work on art and science projects, during which the teachers would retreat to a more passive role. They would refrain from giving instructions, and told the kids to “Be your own teacher”. The open-endedness of the Reggio approach sometimes seemed incompatible with other ideological currents in the classroom, as will be discussed later in this chapter.

In academic literature, the move towards considering children as active agents has also entailed a change from considering adults’ statements about children to “considering statements by children themselves” (Bluebond-Langner and Korbin 2007:243). This turn requires a specification of exactly how children’s statements should be interpreted, or, in other words, what is meant when we claim to be studying children’s language. Whereas children’s language can be studied as the acquisition of appropriate vocabulary and grammar, my concern is with language as what Paul Garrett and Patricia Baquedano-Lopez (2002:345)

refer to as a “social tool”. This involves a consideration not only of children’s “linguistic competence”, but also of their more general “communicative competence” (Garrett and Baquedano-Lopez 2002:345). The difference can be illustrated by considering how refraining from talking can sometimes be a successful social strategy. In other words, communicative competence is a matter of knowing not only *how* to talk or *what* to say, but also of knowing *when* to talk. Consequently, this approach requires attention to the wider context of communication rather than to isolated utterances or conversations.

The context-sensitivity of studying communicative competence makes it difficult, and perhaps even redundant, to attempt to measure individual differences in communication skills. Instead, my intention in the following chapters is to account for the kids’ attempts to attune to the conversational styles of others. Rather than a comparison of individual skills, then, what I will consider is the kids’ “communicative flexibility” (Gumperz and Cook-Gumperz 1982:14), as evidenced by their ability to adapt to changing discursive demands. Some kids often seemed able to adapt to changing communicational demands, whereas others seemed to have a less flexible attitude, and repeatedly ended up being misunderstood or misunderstanding others. This is a recurrent theme in Chapter 2, where I will consider in detail the matches and mismatches of individual styles of communication.

My explorations into the many misunderstandings that seemed to occur in the kids’ interaction led me to consider in more detail the relationship between words and their meanings. It seemed that the kids would often use the same terms for different purposes, or different terms for the same purposes, in either case leading to misunderstandings and sometimes to frustration and anger. In short, even if the words they used did not have a singular meaning, they were treated as if they did. According to Maurice Bloch (2008:27), “the supremely well-adapted tool for human sociability – language – creates at the same time and by its very nature, a major problem for individual members of a community in that it places them at risk of being misled”. Jack Goody (1994) refers to this phenomenon as “polysemy”, or ambiguity, and argues that anthropologists have often failed to account for the variety of meanings that can be evoked by a single word. For instance, a structuralist interpretation of the term “black” as meaning “sinister” ignores the fact that the term can also have more positive connotations, as in “the black earth”. An immediate difficulty therefore arises whenever one attempts to find out what an utterance *means*, because communication always takes place in a social context where more than one interpretation is likely to exist. Goody (1994:66-67) proceeds to argue that anthropologists therefore need to “examine a wider semantic field than a limited number of connotations of a single morpheme”.



Gradually becoming aware of the widespread existence of polysemic signs, and assuming that this might provide a clue to the patterning of communication among the kindergartners, I began searching for a suitable phenomenon that would allow me to study language ambiguity more systematically. I turned my attention to the kids' personal names, which were both widely used and, to a certain degree, invisible in their triviality. Richard Alford (1988:59-60) argues that, even though "semantically meaningful given names are very common", people are often unaware about the semantic meaning of their names. Accordingly, I will not be concerned with the semantic meaning of the kids' names, but with the specific uses to which these names were put. In Chapter 2 I will present the uses of names in oral language, and in Chapter 3 I will consider in more detail the uses of names in written language.

One of the main arguments that will be presented in Chapter 2 is that names on the one hand can serve as important markers of identity, but, on the other hand, that the potential stability that names provide can be distorted when names are used in "creative and playful" ways (Humphrey 2006:158). Names were used not only to denote particular people, but also served as props, or supporting elements, in what I refer to as *name joking*; the manipulation of phonemes or letters for humorous effects. In other words, a potential tension existed between two aspects of names, because they could be considered either as attached to, or as detached from, individuals.

## **Framing communication**

The ambiguous capacity of language to both clarify and obscure meaning causes communicational difficulties for both ethnographer and informants. Speaking the same language, in this case English, is no guarantee that communication will proceed without problems. A number of researchers have attempted to resolve these difficulties, including Gregory Bateson (1956; 1968; 2000). Like Goody, he points out that "the relationship between symbol and referent tends to be multiple" (Bateson 1956:148). However, Bateson argues, people are often surprisingly adept at navigating through such ambiguities in order to understand each other. He suggests that an exclusive focus on word meaning ignores the many "metacommunicative" signals, such as those provided by gestures and prosody, that serve to guide our interpretation of ongoing activities.

In a similar vein, John Gumperz argues that people interpret utterances "in terms of a frame or schema which is identifiable and familiar" (Gumperz 1992:130). Bateson (2000:188)

describes such frames metaphorically by pointing out how a picture frame draws our attention to what is within the frame, and asks us to temporarily ignore that which is outside the frame. Bateson (2000:290) argues that much communication deals with the exchange of signals concerning the relevant frame of interaction, and that certain signals serve as “context markers” to guide such interpretations. Gumperz (1992) refers to context markers as “contextualization cues”, and argues that these cues help relate actions or utterances to their relevant context by limiting the range of possible interpretations. As in Ochs’ (1988) work, the study of communication is thus shifted away from grammatical coherence towards communicative competence, but still with an insistence on the relevance of language in the totality of communicative signals. In the following I will examine the significance of Bateson’s ideas for the study of communication among the kindergartners.

Keeping in mind Corsaro’s reminder not to treat children’s activities only in terms of learning, Bateson’s perspective allows us to consider how social values are transmitted through metacommunicative signals. Rather than approaching learning as a matter of acquiring isolated skills, Bateson argues that people also learn about the context in which learning takes place. In a wide sense, all statements are therefore metacommunicative, because they implicitly affirm the particular codification being applied (Bateson 1968:214). For instance, when teachers referred to the kids as “girls” or “boys”, or as “kindergartners” or “first graders”, they simultaneously signalled the appropriateness of making such distinctions. The relationship between metacommunication and socialization will be treated in Chapter 2, where I will consider the reinforcement of the distinction between kids and grown ups through the use of respect terms such as “Mister”, “Miss”, and “Teacher”. In Chapter 4 I will discuss the labelling of certain terms as “bad words” from a similar perspective.

Goffman (1974:8) argues that framing occurs when people ask themselves, either implicitly or explicitly, “What is it that’s going on here?” Incidentally, this is perhaps the most significant question asked by many ethnographers as well. Framing seems relevant not only to make sense of informants’ worlds, but also when considering the relationship between ethnographer and informants. Bateson’s frame perspective therefore allows us to develop further Fraake’s idea that context is a social accomplishment, by considering how the ethnographer’s ideas about what is going on changes over time. For instance, I initially depended on a distinction between “inside the classroom” and “outside the classroom” to categorize the kids’ activities. However, I soon realized that this particular framing was primarily a product of the teachers’ categorizations, not the kids’. Whereas teachers often referred to the distinction between “inside” and “outside”, such as when they asked the kids to

“play outside”, many of the kids seemed primarily to rely on another, more subtle distinction, according to whether they were being observed by teachers or not. As I discovered, a number of activities that took place in the classroom, but evaded the teachers’ attention, were better categorized as taking place in, following Dyson (1993:19), “unofficial” as opposed to “official” school worlds. Although this distinction often paralleled the inside-outside dichotomy, this was not always the case. As will be described in Chapter 2, the kids employed strategies to circumvent the teachers’ rule about play being restricted to “outside”. This argument could not have been made if I had relied solely on my initial inside-outside distinction. It appears that much of what has been said so far about people’s use of language in communication is also applicable to the communication between ethnographers and their informants. The end result of an ethnographic analysis is thus not an account of how informants frame their world, but an account of how the ethnographer’s and his or her informants’ frames merge.

Unlike verbal exchanges, which are usually turn-based, Bateson points out that metacommunicative signals, such as a smile or a wink, are often exchanged while something else is going on simultaneously. One methodological implication is that ethnographic records, when being translated into linear accounts such as written notes, risk misrepresenting the simultaneousness of signal exchanges that characterizes people’s interaction. In order to avoid such distortions, it is necessary to become familiar with culturally specific communication practices as well as individual styles of communication. Long-term ethnographic fieldwork, combining records of people’s utterances with descriptions of their ways of talking and acting, seems therefore the best remedy against misinterpretations such as those caused by metacommunication and polysemy.

In the following chapters much attention will be given to the kindergartners’ play, and I will now turn to a consideration of how play can be approached using a frame perspective. Until the 1970s, few anthropologists considered children’s play a subject worthy of study in itself, and tended either to ignore children’s activities or to see them primarily in terms of a rehearsal for their adult future (Schwartzman 1978). The difficulty of finding a standard definition of play, Schwartzman (1978:29) argues, has caused many ethnographers to rely more on their own ideas about play than about “the reality of this phenomenon as constructed by members of the society under investigation”. Play has mostly been studied through organized games and sports, in the process ignoring children’s “imaginative play” and solidifying the idea that children’s play is primarily an “imitation of adult activities” (Schwartzman 1978:26). In the following, my concern will primarily be with what

Schwartzman refers to as imaginative play, and I will now turn to a closer examination of what this term refers to.

Norman Denzin (1982:17) points out that the term play is used both as a verb, denoting a social process, and as a noun, denoting a kind of activity. In both cases, the term refers to the type of activity taking place, and ignores the fact that different participants may have different ideas about what is going on. The kindergartners often participated in what appeared to be the same activity, but on closer examination turned out to have different ideas about what activity they were engaged in. If we turn to Bateson's ideas about metacommunication and framing, this challenge can be overcome by considering the term play as referring to a particular *attitude* that participants may signal towards others. The usefulness of referring to play as an attitude will become clear in Chapter 2, where it will be argued that certain context markers were only perceived by some of the kids to be play cues. The kids who did not share these signalling conventions often misinterpreted other kids' cues, and these misunderstandings sometimes led to frustration and anger.

Bateson (1956) argues that humans, as well as many animals, are capable of distinguishing playfulness from seriousness by exchanging the signal "This is play". For instance, when "playing school", the kids would communicate their playfulness both explicitly, by delegating roles such as "teacher" and "students", and implicitly, through exaggerated prosody and gestures. This kind of imaginative, or pretend, play therefore provided a useful arena in which to study the kids' uses of context markers to initiate, maintain, and manipulate play. In addition, this kind of play also allowed me to consider the kids' conceptions of reality. In Goffman's (1974:49) words, "one can learn how our sense of ordinary reality is produced by examining (...) how it is faked". For instance, the kids' actions and utterances when "playing school" provided indications of the perceptions the kids had of how teachers and students were expected to behave. In the following chapters this dual focus will be kept, considering both how play signals succeeded and failed, and how social values were reflected through language use in play.

Bateson (2000:179-180) considers play a particular kind of framing, characterized by the paradox that occurs when the message "This is play" labels the ongoing activity as simultaneously real and not real. Rather than considering such paradoxes as threats to communicational stability, Bateson argues that paradoxes are meaningful context markers, serving to frame ongoing activities as, for instance, play, metaphor, or humor. The play attitude is prevalent not only in children's activities; according to John Schwartzman (1982:51), "a play mode can be adopted toward anything irrespective of its content".

Goffman's (1974:84) distinction between "keying" and "fabrication" provides a further layer to our upcoming discussion about framing. He argues that "whereas a keying intendedly leads all participants to have the same view of what it is that is going on, a fabrication requires difference". In other words, framing is not always a matter of alignment, but can also be a matter of deliberate misleadings. One example of such fabrications among the kindergartners, joking was a common activity in the cafeteria during lunch. The kids would articulate improbable statements about themselves or others, and after a few seconds reveal their playful attitude by exclaiming "I was joking", often to much amusement. As will be discussed in Chapter 2, some of the kids were highly skilled at such framing and sudden reframing through joking, whereas others seemed confused when they failed to notice the metacommunication signalled through these paradoxes. A keying could also be subject to a "rekeying", in what Goffman (1974:156) refers to as "a transformation of transformations", such as when the kids pretended to be playing a game. As will be seen, much confusion arose because some of the kids deliberately manipulated others through such frame-switching.

The kids' tendency to manipulate frames had implications for my interaction with them. The kindergartners shared a fascination for reversals and role changes in their play, and conversations in the peer group were often organized around creative and humorous reversals of relations and events. When conversing with the kids, I could sometimes read their body language and facial expressions to figure out whether we were having a "real" conversation or "pretending" to have one. At other times, however, I was unsure about whether the kids were conversing sincerely with me or playfully manipulating the situation, because their ability to keep a straight face when joking sometimes seemed to be an important part of their play.

The following chapters will treat in detail how successful communication among the kids depended on their ability to successfully exchange signals about the framing of ongoing activities. Focusing on how elements from classroom instruction were incorporated into their activities, I will consider how frames of interaction were established, negotiated, and maintained, thereby allowing the kids to express both personal autonomy and a sense of community. In Chapter 2 I will show how this argument can also be reversed, as elements from play in the school yard were sometimes incorporated into their activities in the official school world through playful frame manipulations.

## Approaching literacy

My primary aim was to examine the kindergartners' uses of literacy in various school contexts. The classroom walls were decorated with drawings, letters, and words; some were created by the teacher, whereas others were created by the kids themselves. The wall next to the "rug area", where much of the classroom instruction took place, was dominated by colourful images of letter-shaped animals. The animals were referred to as "alphafriends", and had names like "Edna Elephant" and "Larry Lion". Often used words such as "I", "my", "see", and "like" had been written on large pieces of white cardboard and stapled to the wall under the heading "High frequency words", and could easily be spotted from the kids' work tables. The kids' names served as labels to distinguish their individual practice books, coat hangers, and seats. In addition, as will be discussed in Chapter 4, written names also played a central role in the teacher's discipline system. During classroom instruction, the teacher focused on teaching the kids skills such as alphabet recognition and letter-sound relationships. In particular, many exercises were intended to develop what has been called "phonemic awareness", defined as "the ability to hear (or perceive) the individual phonemes in a word" (Purcell-Gates *et al.* 2004:49). In addition to this emphasis on literacy *form*, the teacher promoted an awareness of literacy *function* by asking the kids to write about topics of interest to them, such as family, friends, play activities, and upcoming holidays.

Before I go into more detail about the kindergartners' uses of text, it is necessary to consider the academic discourse on literacy to see how researchers have approached the subject. In a much discussed article from 1963, Goody and Watt contrast what they term "literate" and "non-literate" societies, and argue that the introduction of literacy into a society has both social and cognitive consequences. Among other things, they argue, the introduction of a written record makes possible a distinction between myth and history, because mutually inconsistent versions of past events can literally be held up against each other and compared. The ideas from this article have been developed further in Goody's later work, and his arguments have been concerned with both the social and the cognitive implications of literacy. On the social level, Goody (1986) argues that the development of a centralized bureaucracy, with its institutionalized knowledge and power, flourished with the introduction of alphabetic writing. On the cognitive level, Goody (1987:277) argues that certain mathematical concepts, such as multiplication, are "virtually non-existent in oral societies". He also argues that the introduction of literacy has led to a restructuring of language, involving "greater use of abstract terms" and "greater choice of words" (Goody 1987:264).

David Olson (1985:4) agrees with many of Goody's claims, and argues, like him, that "a world with literacy is different from one without literacy". Still, Olson points out, it is misleading to generalize about the implications of literacy the way Goody does, because "writing does not simply cause social or cognitive changes". Olson argues that Goody's arguments should be considered particular examples of how literacy has affected social and cognitive organization, rather than as general and inevitable consequences of literacy. Even though there is a general agreement on the historical significance literacy has had in many societies, the causal relations involved can not easily be pinpointed. For instance, Sylvia Scribner and Michael Cole (1981) have pointed out that many of the consequences Goody assigns to literacy are more likely the results of particular kinds of schooling. This argument is also made by Jeffrey Kittay (1991:168), who argues that, even though literacy has the potential to promote certain ways of thinking about the world, this potential is "not universally exploited by all cultures with writing". Having refined some of the arguments from the 1963 article, Goody (1994) claims that literacy, rather than introducing new skills per se, serves to amplify certain kinds of logical and abstract thinking. For instance, writing allows us to construct tables consisting of rows and columns, making it possible to perform calculations on a level of complexity unavailable to people without writing.

In an attempt to contextualize the notion of literacy that has dominated academic and public discourses in Europe and North America, Jenny Cook-Gumperz (1986b) discusses the historical development of literacy in the public discourse over the last two hundred years. Unlike Goody, her emphasis is not on the historical development of literacy as a technology, but as an idea. Challenging the popular image of literacy as a result of modern schooling, she argues that the introduction of a "single, standardized schooled literacy" has come to replace an earlier notion of multiple literacies (Cook-Gumperz 1986b:22). Arguing that mandatory schooling was introduced not to promote but to control literacy, she claims that schooling was "not an historical cause but rather an historical consequence of the growth of popular literacy" (Cook-Gumperz 1986b:27). She also argues that emphasis has shifted from the nineteenth century view of literacy as a "moral virtue" to a twentieth century consideration of literacy as a measurable "cognitive skill" (Cook-Gumperz 1986b:37).

The most common argument against Goody's generalizations is that he treats literacy as a neutral technology consisting of a set of skills, and not, like Cook-Gumperz, as an ideological construction. In Olson's (1985:15) words, Goody's perspective needs to be expanded to include not only "what literacy does to people", but also "what people do with literacy". Olson (1994:273) argues that being literate is not only a matter of reading and

writing, but about participation in socially approved discourses, involving knowing “which texts are important, how they are to be read and interpreted, and how they are to be applied in talk and action”. Scribner and Cole (1981:236) suggest replacing the term “literacy” with a plural concept of “socially organized practices”, because “literacy is not simply knowing how to read and write a particular script but applying this knowledge for specific purposes in specific contexts of use”.

The academic discourse on literacy appears to rest on two different meanings of the term literacy, on the one hand as a set of neutral skills, and on the other hand as an ideological tool. In order to consider the relevance of the skills-based approach for the implementation of contemporary education policies, I turn now to the federal legislation on education in the United States. The “No Child Left Behind Act” (NCLB) of 2001 is the most recent education reform in the United States, and has been referred to as “the most comprehensive federal legislation governing state and local educational policies in US history” (Sadovnik 2006:196). The NCLB states that curricular materials should be based on “scientifically based research” resulting from “controlled and quantifiable studies” (Baquedano-Lopez *et al.* 2005:1), and as such offers a glimpse into how academic and ideological discourses sometimes become entangled and near indistinguishable.

One main objective of the NCLB is to reduce the achievement gap by setting explicit standards for what teachers should teach and what students should learn in all American public schools. The law stresses “accountability”, understood as “the establishment of clear educational goals, along with the creation of tests that assess whether or not these goals are being attained” (Sloan 2007:25). For instance, the NCLB calls for annual testing of students in Grades 3-8, and requires each state to set “adequate yearly progress” goals for each school (Karen 2005:166). Proponents of the legislation argue that the move towards standardization serves “to address the uncertainty, even confusion, teachers may experience about what to teach” (Sloan 2007:25). Critics, on the other hand, point out the “negative emotional impact” these requirements may have on teachers, because it is implied that “teachers do not or will not work unless pushed, forced, or even coerced by high-stakes systems of accountability” (Sloan 2007:25). The term “accountability” has been described as a euphemism for an “intensified surveillance” of teachers’ work, and there is a concern about whether the best qualified teachers may leave the profession because, it is claimed, teachers are increasingly seen as “technicians” rather than “professionals” (Sloan 2007:27).

Even though federal law only demands from schools that they assess and make publicly available test results from students in Grade 3 and up, the emphasis on skills



promoted by the NCLB was noticeable in the kindergarten classroom. The kindergartners' literacy skills were assessed several times during my fieldwork, and they had also been tested when they entered kindergarten. One by one, the kids were asked to join either the teacher or an assistant in a corner of the classroom, where they were asked to name letters and their corresponding phonemes, as well as to produce rhymes, and to recognize single phonemes in words. The testing, which emphasized literacy form rather than literacy function, served several purposes. For the school administration, the assessments allowed for a monitoring of the kids' progress throughout the school year as well as from year to year. For the teachers, the assessments provided indications of each student's relative skill level, and served to supplement other impressions they had of the kids' academic achievement. One teacher also argued that the tests would benefit the kids themselves, who would become familiar with the assessment routines, and thus be better prepared when facing the more important tests in Grade 3.

When asked about the significance of the NCLB on their teaching, several teachers replied that they did not worry about having test results monitored by the school administration, but noted that its time-consuming nature was a big concern. In addition to arranging the actual assessments, the teachers also had to make preparations as well as to evaluate the results. The NCLB also required the teachers to spend time every day on a Language Arts books, which, according to one teacher, encouraged teachers to treat students as passive receivers of knowledge rather than promoting the functional aspects of reading and writing. Teachers spoke warmly of both Reggio and TRIBES, and pointed out that, if they were free to choose, they would have spent more time on these programmes at the expense of the requirements of the NCLB. Whereas the TRIBES programme could be incorporated into many routine activities, and, as such, was compatible with many of the requirements of the NCLB, the Reggio programme emphasized non-measurable educational goals that in many ways seemed to contradict the NCLB's stated principles. Linda Valli and Marilyn Chambliss (2007) have noted a similar pattern, and distinguish what they term "child-centered" from "test-centered" classroom cultures. They argue that if "a child-centered culture is supplanted by a test-centered culture, it is likely that academic achievement, as well as meaningful school experiences and personal bonds among teachers and students, will diminish" (Valli and Chambliss 2007:73).

The NCLB's emphasis on standardized tests seems to rest on the idea that literacy is a set of technical and ideologically unbiased skills which can, to a certain degree, be measured. Critics argue that standardized tests do not primarily measure reading and writing abilities,

but rather measure conformity to a standardized “academic literacy” (Purcell-Gates *et al.* 2004:66). Opponents of the skills-based approach argue that a system based on testing not only assumes that children learn the same way, but also rephrases the problem of illiteracy from blaming the society to blaming the individual for their lacking abilities when they do not learn to read according to a set standard. In Brian Street’s (1995:125) words, the idea that literacy is a neutral set of skills diverts blame “from institutions to individuals, from power structures to personal morality”. Whereas supporters of the skills-based movement emphasize the emancipatory and enlightening aspects of becoming literate, critics point out that “lack of literacy is more likely to be a symptom of poverty and deprivation than a cause” (Graff 1979 cited in Street 1995:29). Alan Sadovnik (2006:206) is unconvinced by the NCLB’s emphasis on assessing literacy skills, and argues that “the major shortcoming of NCLB is its entirely school-based solutions to problems of educational inequality”, as “it does nothing to improve the economic opportunities for low-income families or their children”.

It should now be clear that the term literacy is used in two senses in both the political and academic discourse. On the one hand, Goody, Olson, and the proponents of the NCLB consider literacy an objectively measurable entity. On the other hand, Scribner and Cole, Street, and opponents of the NCLB consider literacy an ideological tool, and argue that the consequences of literacy are highly dependent upon local contexts. According to Street (1995:161), Goody’s claims about the “neutrality” of literacy is in itself “ideological”, as evidenced by the way it has been applied by proponents of a skills-based approach to literacy. These differing perspectives on what literacy *is* also affects ideas about how literacy should be *taught*, as can be seen in the debate between proponents and opponents of the NCLB.

As I have shown, no consensus has been reached regarding how literacy should be defined in either political or academic discourses. One solution when approaching literacy ethnographically may be to address the subject not from above, through an attempt to find a single definition, but from below, by locating specific “literacy practices” (Street 1995:133), referring “not only to the event itself but the conceptions of the reading and writing process that people hold when they are engaged in the event”. In this perspective, literacy is not one singular medium, but a complexly constructed set of social tools and regulations that must be understood in relation to language and socialization routines. By shifting attention away from literacy skills in isolation, and towards socially contextualized literacy practices, it becomes possible to consider the relationship between specific events and their ideological connections. The study of literacy practices must, however, also involve a consideration of individual skills, because “print literacy has a unique set of requirements, not the least of

which are the coding and encoding of phonemes” (Purcell-Gates *et al.* 2004:79). Deborah Hicks (1996:19) emphasizes both the social and the cognitive aspects by defining literacy as “engagement with written texts and as participation in the social practices that collectively are constitutive of formal educational processes”. This definition will be applied in the following chapters.

## **Contextualizing literacy skills**

I have argued that in order to conceptualize literacy in terms of its relevance in everyday life, it must be approached primarily in terms of social practices rather than cognitive skills. Importantly, I am not discarding the idea that the uses of reading and writing require certain skills, only establishing that such skills can not be *a priori* defined or measured. An assumption is that literacy tests in general tend to ignore the social aspects of literacy by emphasizing literacy form over literacy function. In Cook-Gumperz’ (1986b:41) words, we need to consider not only “the acquisition of printed word decoding skills but all the skills that make up the school language experience as a whole”. A different set of tools is therefore needed in order to approach the relationship between literacy and cognition. In Chapter 3 an effort will be made to empirically integrate ideological with skills-based perspectives on literacy by considering the relevance of particular literacy skills in official and unofficial school worlds.

Several researchers have pointed out the interdependence and interpenetration of spoken and written language. Keith Basso (1989:426) argues that literacy, “wherever it exists, is always only one of several communication channels”, and should therefore be studied “in relation to (...) other channels”. Kittay (1991:168) argues that different modes of communication “use each other, act as inversions of each other, supplement and cede to each other”. In the following chapters, oral and written language will be seen as overlapping and mutually influencing modes of communication, each serving as a prism through which the other could be articulated. The empirical connection between oral and written language among the kindergartners will be made clear in Chapter 3, where I argue that letters and words served as personal anchoring devices by connecting new experiences to familiar routines.

Whereas written language is usually considered a transcription of oral language, Olson (1994:68) argues that “writing systems provide the concepts and categories for thinking about the structure of spoken language rather than the reverse”. Learning to read, he argues, is

largely “a matter of coming to hear, and think about, speech in a new way”, because “we introspect language in terms laid down by our writing systems” (Olson 1994:8). Because reading and writing alphabetic script necessarily involves some kind of visualization of otherwise invisible units of speech, becoming literate seems potentially to affect our understanding of oral language. For instance, Goody (1987:274) argues that the explicit and formal separation of “words” as units of language is characteristic of literate societies. The same argument has been made about young children, who, according to David Yaden (1986:53), “have little reason to view their speech as being made up of discrete, isolable units” until they are “exposed to the written language”. In this perspective, the concept of “word” as a meaningful unit is a product of a literate world view, which, according to Olson (1991:258), promotes a reflection on language itself that he terms “metalinguistic”. Keeping in mind the importance of considering such features as potentials rather than inevitable consequences of literacy, I turn now to some of the proposed links between literacy and metalinguistic language use.

Olson (1991:260) argues that literacy potentially changes “the level of discourse from one about the world into one about the text”, and that literacy and metalinguistic awareness are connected on two levels of abstraction. First, because writing is in itself a metalinguistic activity, as it represents “aspects of oral language in its orthography”; second, because an “explicit metalanguage” is used to talk *about* literacy, such as when we talk about “words”. By introducing “a conceptual boundary between the words and their meanings” (Olson 1994:32-33), literacy potentially promotes metalinguistic abilities by making language an object of reflection. In other words, Olson (1994:282) argues that becoming literate makes possible a shift “from thinking about things to thinking about representations of those things”.

Critics have pointed out that other factors than literacy may have a more significant impact on metalinguistic awareness. Gumperz and Levinson (1996:9), for instance, argue that oral language externalizes thought in much the same way as text externalizes oral language, thus potentially promoting metalinguistic awareness. In other words, oral language creates a trace which, although relatively fluid when compared to that of written language, still serves as a record, allowing people to reflect on the metalinguistic aspects of communication. Even though talk is often transparent, special circumstances such as misunderstandings and translations across languages often lead people to attend to the metalinguistic aspects of talk, such as when they attempt to find synonyms or definitions (Street 1995:22). Bilingualism has therefore been suggested as a powerful source of metalinguistic awareness (Peccei 2006:40).

Also challenging Olson's argument about the importance of literacy for metalinguistic awareness, Courtney Cazden (1974:33) suggests that children may exhibit a larger degree of metalinguistic awareness than is found among adults, as they often "play with the elements of language for the very delight of self-expression and mastery". Evidence regarding the causal relationship between literacy and metalinguistic abilities thus points in two directions. Metalinguistic awareness can be seen as a prerequisite for the acquisition of literacy, but can also be considered a by-product of becoming literate. "Metalinguistic awareness" will be used in the following in the sense proposed by Cazden (1974:29), who defines it as "the ability to make language forms opaque and attend to them in and for themselves". Consistent with my concern with the social uses of literacy, this definition guides attention to the implications rather than the sources of metalinguistic skills.

Turning now to the methodological implications of the above discussion, Emilia Ferreiro and Ana Teberosky (1982) present a useful perspective on how to approach the relation between literacy, language, and cognition. They suggest that children work their way through a number of "hypotheses" about the forms and functions of literacy. For instance, they argue that children may "use greater numbers of graphic characters (...) if the object is bigger, longer, older, or if a greater number of objects are referred to" (Ferreiro and Teberosky 1982:184). Such hypotheses are sometimes made explicit, either when children are asked to provide a justification for using a specific strategy, or through their "spontaneous self-repairs" (Peccei 2006:81). The ethnographic discovery of such hypotheses demands attention not only to the kids' written products, but also to the processes involved in reading, drawing, and writing.

Ferreiro and Teberosky (1982:65) assume an end point to the development process when children reach a "one-to-one correspondence between graphic and sound segments". However, as discussed above, my perspective here considers literacy not in terms of a unidirectional progress from illiteracy to literacy, but in terms of the specific ideas people have about the forms and functions of literacy. I turn, therefore, to Deborah Tannen's (1993) term "schema", which in many respects is similar to what Ferreiro and Teberosky refer to as "hypotheses", but eliminates the idea of an endpoint to the development. In addition, the term allows us to consider the relationship between such schemas and what Bateson refers to as frames, because framing can be studied as the application of cognitive schemas to ongoing activities. Tannen (1993:41) argues that schemas can be approached by considering how people's "structures of expectation" are revealed through "surface evidence". For instance, the

kindergartners would often comment on other kids' writing, thus providing clues about their otherwise implicit ideas about literacy.

One pattern that was revealed by this approach was the kids' different uses of literacy in official and unofficial school worlds. When unsupervised by the teacher, the kids tended to adopt elements such as "voting" and "hangman" from the classroom into their play, in the process modifying the activities to suit their own purposes. In particular, they tended to emphasize name writing. According to Janet Bloodgood (1999), children's name writing can reflect their mastery of both literacy form and function. In other words, names can provide a way to examine the schemas underlying the kindergartners' uses of literacy. This will be discussed in detail in Chapter 3, which addresses the kids' different ideas about written representations of their names.

It has already been established that ethnographers, like their informants, rely on framing to make sense of ongoing activities. Whereas in most cases people depend on their memory or what other people tell them when accounting for past events, ethnographers tend to rely on some kind of record to assist their interpretations. This tool, as Goody (1994) has pointed out, allows for alternative (although not necessarily more correct) interpretations of past events. During my fieldwork, the prevalence of the kids' names did not initially appear significant to me. Due to my habit of writing down oral discourse as accurately as I could, however, it was possible for me to return to accounts of earlier events once the kids' names had caught my attention. Without a record, this would not have been possible. I collected both drawings and written products from the kids, and told them from the beginning that they could draw and write in my notebook. I soon began bringing two sets of notebooks and pens to school, which made it possible for me to take notes in one book while the kids were drawing and writing in the other. These observational data were compared with observations from the classroom, and triangulated by arranging informal interviews with the kids during which I asked them to read or write particular texts, or to talk about reading and writing.

One particular challenge when taking observational notes was the many overlaps and unfinished utterances, which were often difficult to transcribe accurately. Such instances highlighted the difficulties involved when translating oral into written discourse, which is usually linear and often consists of a single, uninterrupted voice (Emerson *et al.* 1995:75-76). I have used double quotation marks ( " " ) to signify all voices other than my own, both informants' and scholars'. I have added italics to utterances that were emphasized by the speaker in cases where prosody seemed relevant either to the speaker or to the listeners. Single slashes ( / / ) indicate phonetic transcription; the letter "k" can thus be distinguished

from the phoneme “/k/”. All names are pseudonyms, chosen because they represent approximately the same complexity as the kids’ original names. Textual representations of names have been removed from the kids’ drawings without being replaced by pseudonyms.

In Chapter 2 I will consider the uses of names in oral language, and, in particular, the issue of how elements were transformed as they were transmitted between official and unofficial school worlds. Chapter 3 turns to written representations of the kids’ names, and treats the question of how cognitive and social structures can be approached simultaneously using frame analysis. I will present some specific literacy skills taught in the official school world, but the primary emphasis will be on how text was used among the kids in unofficial school worlds. In Chapter 4, attention is turned to the official school world, where I will consider how social values were transmitted through academic and social priming events. A guiding principle in Chapter 4 is Cook-Gumperz’ (1986a:15) insistence that, in order to approach the transmission of knowledge, it is important to know “what constitutes valid knowledge”. I will also describe how the routinized and therefore often predictable nature of classroom interaction made the teacher’s framing vulnerable to rekeyings by the kids. A distinction I make throughout the following chapters is between “children”, referring to children in general, and “kids” or “kindergartners”, referring to the particular kindergartners in San Francisco.

## Chapter 2

### Naming practices

---

In this chapter I will discuss naming practices among the kindergartners. When otherwise unspecified, the term *name* will refer to a person's given name or nickname, whichever was used in daily interaction among the kids. After presenting some of the different uses to which names were put in oral communication, I will argue that whereas some of the kindergartners primarily used names as markers of identity, others challenged this assumed fixity by manipulating communication frames for humorous effects. The identification of names with individuals on one level of discourse thus served to conceal the ambiguity of such names on other levels of discourse.

I will argue that the ambiguity of words in general, and of names in particular, both obstructed and facilitated communication between the kids. This will be illustrated with examples of how the kids negotiated play in the school yard. Both the initiation and maintenance of particular activities often depended on the ability to develop shared communication frames. However, as will be shown, the convergence of such frames was not always a prerequisite for participation in play. Turning to the classroom, I intend to illustrate how the kindergartners negotiated the classroom rules, in the process using the ambiguity of names for play purposes. I will argue that, as with social rules in general, rules governing language use can be considered resources that can be manipulated for social effects.

#### Names in communication

When Sebastian was transferred from another school in February, the other kindergartners had already spent more than five months getting familiar with the school environment and with each other. This became evident during Sebastian's attempts to initiate contact with the other kids, such as when they gathered around the cafeteria table for lunch. Under no direct teacher supervision, the kids could choose where to sit and what to talk about, and often engaged each other in discussions about video games, family trips, and the quality of the cafeteria food. The kids exchanged jokes and rhymes that were considered inappropriate in



the official school world, and engaged in widespread sharing of stickers and snacks brought from home. Sometimes these items were bartered, but normally one kid would simply call the name of another, and throw a piece of popcorn, biscuit, or candy in his or her direction. Some kids gave away snacks to whoever asked, but most of the kids would share only with those they referred to as “friends”, knowing from experience that the favour would be returned at a later time. The cafeteria staff had prohibited all food sharing to make sure that the kids did not give away all their food, and the kids were therefore cautious about sharing when adults were around. The activity was often cloaked in suspense as the kids carefully looked around to locate the “lunch ladies”, before exchanging looks of secrecy as the exchange was made. In this sense snacks served as what Goffman (1987:247) terms “ritual supplies”, allowing for social exchanges in an environment that otherwise provided few possibilities for “expressing mutual regard and extending mutual aid”.

Once seated around the cafeteria table, the kids were not allowed to get up unless they raised their hand and waited for permission by the cafeteria staff. In effect, the only way to interact with other kids than those sitting nearby was to shout at them. On his second day Sebastian had a small bag of popcorn in his hand as he sat down at the cafeteria table. He repeatedly tried to catch Naeem’s attention by shouting “Hey you” and “You want some popcorn?” but Naeem, seated near the other end of the table, did not respond. Several kids volunteered to accept the popcorn, but, after repeated unsuccessful attempts to call on Naeem’s attention, Sebastian decided to eat the popcorn himself. Sebastian was familiar with similar sharing routines from his former school, but he still did not know the names of the kids in his new class. Whereas the other kids only had to learn one new name upon Sebastian’s arrival, he was faced in turn with learning the names of nineteen other kids. Consequently, Sebastian’s attempts to participate in the sharing of snacks during his first days often failed, because he did not know the proper address terms. Sebastian’s use of pronouns rather than names was relatively disadvantageous, because such deictic terms could refer to any of the nineteen other kids around the table.

Sebastian soon learned Naeem’s name, however, and within a week the two boys were engaged in conversations as well as mutual food sharing across the cafeteria table. By pointing and asking the kids sitting near him “What’s his name?” and “What’s her name again?”, Sebastian also acquired the names of most of the other kids, although he still did not know everyone’s name by the time school ended in June. In addition to using names to initiate conversation, Naeem and Sebastian would sometimes apply each other’s names during an ongoing conversation, in order to maintain interaction when it was threatened by outsiders.

For instance, when Naeem was interrupted by Vanessa during a conversation between Sebastian and himself, Sebastian said “Naeem, I have a Playstation at my house”, successfully regaining Naeem’s attention. Sebastian’s gradual transition from using deictic terms to using names shows how the physical barriers of the loud cafeteria environment could be partly overcome by using appropriate address terms.

Another aspect of how names can be used is found in the argument that “naming expresses as well as constitutes social relations” (Bodenhorn and Vom Bruck 2006:5). Teachers addressed the kids and each other using given names, but applied what Alford (1988:119) refers to as “respect terms” such as “Miss”, “Mister”, or “Teacher” when talking to the kids about other adults. The kids referred to each other using given names or nicknames, with the exception of during imaginative play, when they would add titles to their names or change their names completely. The kids used respect terms when addressing adults in school, but sometimes used different terms when talking to each other *about* these adults. For instance, the kids would refer to a member of the cafeteria staff as “the lunch lady” when talking about her, but would use the term “Miss” when addressing her directly.

According to Alford (1988:51), names potentially communicate both “messages to the members of the society at large about who an individual is [and] to the named individual about who he or she is expected to be”. In this way, names serve as context markers, or what Bateson (2000:290) refers to as “signals whose major function is to *classify* contexts”. In other words, the presence or absence of respect terms potentially signals the relative social status of the speakers. Whereas children’s use of respect terms when addressing adults reconfirms an already existing asymmetric relationship, the absence of such respect terms among children signals equality by communicating an invitation to and a sign of “intimacy” and “equality” (Alford 1988:118).

The use of names as markers of relative status illustrates Bateson’s (2000:177-178) argument that verbal communication occurs on “many contrasting levels of abstraction”. One single utterance, such as the word “Naeem” uttered by Sebastian during a conversation between the two, potentially communicates both on a “denotative”, or referential, level, and a “metacommunicative” level, defined as “the level we use to correct our perception of communicative behavior” (Bateson 2000:215). Elsewhere, Bateson (1968:214) argues that “all cues which define status and role are metacommunicative, since the recipient of any message is guided in his interpretation of that message and in his resulting action by his view of the relative roles and status between himself and the speaker”. In other words, the use of names must be considered a metacommunicative as well as a denotative act, because the

conventional act of naming in conversation always reveals information about the relationship between the speakers. Sebastian and Naeem communicated not only denotatively, but also marked off their relationship as different from adult-child relationships by using each other's names. Once Sebastian knew the names of the other kids, he was better equipped to establish and maintain communication. This allowed him to communicate over greater distances in the cafeteria as well as the school yard, and also seemed to reduce the social distance inherent in being a newcomer.

Another naming practice will be described next, exemplified by an episode that took place as the kids were in the classroom, getting ready to go to lunch.

“Nelson, you may line up ... Felipe, you may line up.” Nelson and Felipe get up from the rug and walk towards the classroom door, where they wait for the rest of the kids to line up behind them before they can go to lunch. The others sit quietly on the rug as the teacher calls their names one by one. Nelson suddenly runs towards the teacher, yelling “Teacher, Felipe is hitting”. Felipe is still standing in his assigned spot by the door, but his stern facial expression reveals his anger. The teacher looks sharply at Felipe and says “Felipe! No hitting! Don't you remember what we talked about?” Felipe looks angry, and protests “But he called me Felipi”. Nelson quickly replies “Well he called me Nelsin”. Felipe turns furiously to Nelson, his voice now screeching as he protests: “No I did *not*”, his fists clenched and his eyes almost overflowing with tears. The teacher looks directly at Felipe, then turns around and reaches for Felipe's name among the collection of twenty name-tagged clothes pegs hanging on the wall. She moves his name from the orange to the red zone on the laminated sheet of paper, indicating that he will have to stay in the classroom during afternoon recess as a punishment. Felipe folds his arms across his chest, and looks down through eyebrows that are now almost covering his eyes in a display of anger and perceived injustice.

Andre Iteanu (2000:24) has argued that “it is often the users rather than the bearers of a name who hold power”. This was definitely so in Felipe's case. He was uncomfortable with the nickname given him by some of the other kids, and his angered insistence that his name was “Felipe, not Felipi” could be heard repeated almost daily. Nelson's apparent refusal of Felipe's name seemed to be a threat not only to his name, but to his sense of self. In Barbara Bodenhorn and Gabriele Vom Bruck's (2006:25) words, sometimes “to damage the name is to damage the person”. Felipe's tendency to respond violently was not shared by the other kids, but many of the kindergartners showed evidence that they found their names to be significant markers of identity. For instance, many of the kids protested when their names

were misrepresented, either in spoken or written language. In both talk and text, names therefore seem to exemplify what Olson (1994:29) refers to as metonymy, or “taking signs (...) as somehow embodying the things they are signs of”.

To sum up so far, three aspects of names in use have been presented. Names were used denotatively, to initiate and maintain communication, as well as metacommunicatively, to signal relative social status. In addition, names served as markers of identity, exemplified in the above episode where Felipe responded with anger when Nelson called him “Felipi”. The multiple uses of names in interaction point to the argument made by Caroline Humphrey (2006:161), that names can be “both highly denotative and highly connotative”. On a more general level, it can be argued that this multiplicity of possible meanings illustrates the fact that names, like language in general, has the potential both to clarify and to obscure communication. Goody (1994:66) refers to this phenomenon as “polysemy”, and argues, like Bloch (1998:44), that ethnographers must be careful to distinguish between the “words” and the “concepts” of their informants. The episode involving Nelson and Felipe will be discussed in more detail later. For now, the important point is that names were ambiguous terms, with a wide range of potential uses and interpretations.

### **”I don’t have a name”**

Another opportunity for Sebastian to partake in activities around the cafeteria table, once he knew the names of the other kids, was through name joking. Many of the kids valued the ability to switch and manipulate names, and Naeem and Nelson were particularly famed for their name jokes. Naeem would impersonate adults and other kids by copying their voices and gestures, and would jokingly turn to other kids and say things like “It’s me, Vanessa” to Kara, followed by laughter by other kids as he kept insisting and she kept refuting his claim. Such acts contributed to the other kids’ portrayal of Naeem and Nelson as “funny guys”. This kind of name joking supports Iteanu’s (2000:24) argument that “names can be used either to reassert and reproduce the social system or to manipulate the social reality to create change or personal power”.

Phillip Glenn (2003:19-20) argues that humor of this kind depends on the establishment and maintenance of two simultaneous and mutually excluding frames of interaction. Bateson refers to this as a paradox, and argues that similar paradoxes often occur in communication because we signal on different levels that are not always in accordance with each other. What is said is often accompanied by metacommunicative signals, such as

when a person nods or raises his or her voice to emphasize a point, or, in contrast, when a person blinks or crosses two fingers to signal that what is said is untrue. In the latter case a paradox occurs, and Bateson's argument is that these paradoxes serve as context markers to signal frames such as play, humor, or metaphor. Naeem and Nelson's success at constructing name jokes depended on their ability to create such paradoxes by balancing two frames. This kind of humor was not popular with all the kids, and Naeem and Nelson found particular entertainment value in provoking Felipe as well as others who seemed to consider such paradoxes disturbing rather than amusing. The assumed fixity of names seemed to make them particularly efficient tools for joking. Naeem and Nelson manipulated what Bodenhorn and Vom Bruck (2006:2) has referred to as the "powerful connection between name and self-identity" by detaching names from persons. In this sense, their joking illustrates how language is "not simply (...) a grammatical skill, but (...) a set of speech strategies which children use to structure social action and to control and effect communication" (Cook-Gumperz and Corsaro 1986:2).

The ability to construct such paradoxical frames was, however, not the only skill required to perform name jokes. In addition, the ability to detach names from identities requires an attitude towards language which several authors (Cazden 1974; Olson 1994; Bateson 2000) refer to as "metalinguistic". In order to attend to the metalinguistic aspects of language, it is necessary to treat language forms as reified objects rather than simply using them to convey meaning. Name joking among the kindergartners depended on the metalinguistic ability to detach names from individuals. Whereas many of the kids would treat their names primarily as a substantial part of their identity, a few of the kids, like Naeem and Nelson, repeatedly illustrated how names can also be considered arbitrary and negotiable labels.

Such metalinguistic language use was illustrated both by Naeem's switching of names and Nelson's manipulations of single phonemes in the names of other kids. Nelson also made rhymes using other kids' names, and Naeem would sometimes attempt to say names backwards. When an older student approached Naeem in the cafeteria and asked "What's your name?" Naeem looked at him for a second, and then replied "I don't have a name" before turning away, skilfully detaching his name from his person. Unlike many of the other kids, Naeem would sometimes ask the teacher for synonyms. For instance, when the teacher asked "Who has been on a carousel?", Naeem asked "Is it the same as a merry-go-round?" On another occasion the teacher asked the kids to tell her another word for "palace", and Naeem

alone raised his hand and said “castle”. These are all examples of Naeem’s conception of names as fluid and detachable from the objects and people named.

It is necessary to point out that Naeem and Nelson’s reputation as “funny” was not only a product of their metalinguistic language use. The two boys would also attract attention to their own jokes by gesturing and laughing loudly after telling them. The use of prosody and gestures to signal the relevant frame is similar to what Gumperz (1992:131) calls “contextualization cues”, defined as “any feature of linguistic form that contributes to the signalling of contextual presuppositions”. The contagiousness of the kids’ laughter, similar to what Corsaro (1985:209) describes as “group glee”, led kids who were not part of the activity to join the collective laughter, apparently more for the sake of taking part in the activity than because they found the joke to be funny. In other words, when Naeem laughed at his own jokes, the other kids would often laugh with him, regardless of whether they had in fact heard what he said. This illustrates the point made by Glenn (2003:28), that “the metacommunicative function of laughter is not simply responsive but also constitutive of the context”. Naeem and Nelson’s status as “funny guys” can not be understood with reference only to their metalinguistic language use, but must be understood in terms of their metacommunicative skills as well.

When the kindergarten teacher began taking attendance by calling the kids’ last names rather than their given names in the classroom, her attempts were quickly thwarted by outbursts of laughter when she mentioned anyone’s last name. A few days earlier, Naeem had asked other kids about their “last names” in the cafeteria, and, if they told him, had laughed at them while repeating the name. Other kids soon joined Naeem’s laughing, and, within two days, surnames were considered objects of humor among many of the kids. The exotic quality of many of the kids’ surnames probably contributed to the consideration of them as funny, but Naeem’s laughing, combined with his already established status as “funny guy”, seemed to be significant factors in the establishment of surnames as objects of humor. The teacher soon returned to calling the kids by their given names, seemingly unfamiliar with Naeem’s recent joking campaign in the cafeteria.

Two general tendencies can now be discerned regarding the kids’ uses of names. On the one hand, names were considered personal and unique markers of identity. On the other hand, some of the kids manipulated these names *as words*, in the process fabricating realities for others. The argument is not that Felipe lacked metalinguistic language, but that he did not attend to the metalinguistic aspect of language in the particular episode in question. Arguing that “ambiguities and misunderstandings always occur”, Gumperz (in Prevnigano and di

Luzio 2003:17) claims that, rather than asking “whether or not people understand factual information”, the important ethnographic question is whether they are able to “attune to each other’s interpretive processes”. It appears that the ability to switch between aspects of language use has certain social implications. In the following section, attention will be turned to how participation in play required both metacommunicative and metalinguistic flexibility.

## **Playing “monster” and “tag”**

Before we return to Felipe and Nelson in the classroom, it is necessary to consider the kids’ play in the school yard. Bateson (1956) argues that play is related to humor, and is characterized by the paradox that arises when participants communicate “This is play” while simultaneously signalling that they are taking the activity seriously. This attitude was communicated in a number of ways during imaginative play among the kids, for example by announcing one’s role by saying “I’m the mom” or “I’m the police officer”, or by assigning roles to others by saying “You’re the waiter” or “You can be the dog”. Successful play participation among the kindergartners often depended on the ability to recognize and switch between frames related to play and non-play. For instance, Asim initially responded with frustration at the other kids’ refusal to pass the soccer ball to him in the school yard. As he gradually came to see soccer as a particular game with specific rules, however, he no longer cried when the ball was kept from him, instead accepting the premises of the soccer frame.

According to Bateson (1956:148), “it is by play that an individual learns that there are sorts and categories of behavior”, or, in other words, it is through play that one learns the principles of framing. Expanding on Bateson’s argument, it can be claimed that humor in general, and name joking in particular, potentially presents children with the idea that there are also different sorts and categories of language. In other words, metalinguistic awareness appears to be promoted through language play, just as flexible social identities can be promoted through imaginative play. In both cases, it is crucial to understand what is going on not in terms of whether the activity *is* play or humor, but whether participants *interpret* what is going on as play or humor. In Denzin’s (1982:23-24) words, “one person’s play is another person’s work, or non-play”.

Schwartzman (1978) draws a distinction between “games” and “play” by pointing out the rigidity of the former and the flexibility of the latter. Games, with their “codified system of rules”, are normally less dependent on the metacommunication that is often necessary for the successful maintenance of play (Schwartzman 1978:219-220). In actual social life the

distinction is less clear, because activities usually considered games often involve elements of playfulness, such as when kids playing basketball pretended to be professional basketball players. These kids would attend more to the realistic performance of “time-outs” and “high fives” than to the actual score between the teams. Conversely, imaginative play sometimes contained game-like elements, such as when arguments were made about the distribution of limited resources such as stickers and fake dollar bills. As in conversation and name joking, a certain discursive flexibility sometimes seemed necessary for participation in these activities. In the following episode, another misunderstanding occurs, this time between Felipe and Cho.

Tears roll down his cheeks as Felipe runs across the school yard. He approaches the teacher who asks “What’s wrong Felipe?” Felipe points to Cho and tells the teacher “He says I’m a monster”. The teacher looks over at the other kids who are still playing, and asks gently “Maybe he is playing a game pretending to be monsters?” Felipe looks unconvinced, and repeats “No, he said I’m a monster”. When the teacher approaches Cho and asks him to explain what happened, Cho confirms the teacher’s suggestion that they were “playing a game”. Felipe is still not persuaded, and walks away in anger.

This situation can best be understood with reference to two of the games played among the kindergartners, called “tag” and “monster”. Similar to what Corsaro (1985:219) has referred to as “running and chasing routines”, these activities were only allowed in the school yard. The kids seldom negotiated the rules of these games in advance, relying instead on conventionalized context markers both to initiate and to maintain the activity.

Despite their similarities, the two games had some clearly distinguishing features. A game of “tag” started when one kid “tagged” another by saying “tag” and touching him or her with one hand. This would cause everyone to run off in different directions to avoid the tagged person, who was now considered to be “it”. A game of “monster” began when one or more kids yelled “monster” while pointing at another kid. When the above episode occurred, Felipe was unfamiliar with this convention.

He did not interpret Cho’s utterance as a context marker signalling the initiation of a game of monster, and acted instead as if Cho had characterized him as a monster. His failure to notice that the term monster was used as a context marker to shift from a non-play frame to a play frame illustrates how misunderstandings occur when words have different meanings to different participants. If Felipe had responded like regular participants in the game, he would have pretended to transform into a monster by making faces, perhaps growling and drooling while slowly approaching the other kids. Don also violated these conventions on one



occasion, when he walked casually into an ongoing game of “monster”. As the other kid growled aggressively at him, Don growled back rather than running away, leaving the original monster apparently clueless about how he should face this unexpected turn of events.

A game of “monster” ended when the monster successfully captured one or more kids. Often, the chase would go on for several minutes before this happened, as the monster walked, or limped, with slow, exaggerated steps after the other kids. The chased kids did not simply run away, but switched between approaching and avoiding the monster, yelled “You can’t catch me”, and sometimes screamed in fear if the monster singled them out as a target. The kids who were being chased sometimes appeared to be genuinely frightened. According to Corsaro (1985:220), the “feigned fear” exhibited by children in their play often borders between real and pretend fear. In contrast, the “tag” game involved no such ritualized prolonging of the chase. Instead, when the person designated “it” successfully tagged another kid, the two would instantly switch roles. This back and forth role switching would often go on until the school bell rang, and the kids playing “tag” seemed motivated by the competitive rather than the pretend element of the game.

“Monster” and “tag” were both games in Schwartzman’s sense, but the kids who played “monster” tended to emphasize the make-believe aspects of the game, whereas the kids who played “tag” usually emphasized its competitive nature. Still, both activities primarily revolved around issues regarding fear and safety, and much of the entertainment value seemed related to the act of approaching, and then retreating from, a dangerous situation. Even if this fear was more visual and ritualized in “monster”, the exploration of fear seemed to be a central motivation behind both activities.

Misunderstandings also occurred among the kids playing tag, because the participants did not always have a shared conception of what rules they were playing by. In particular, some kids had difficulties with the concept of role switching. Kyle would often initiate games of tag, but seemed unable to keep track of who was “it” at any given time, sometimes leaving the other participants frustrated because he kept running away after being tagged. Making matters more complicated for Kyle, the other kids would sometimes take advantage of his difficulties by claiming that he “didn’t do it right” when he had, in fact, managed to tag someone correctly. Kyle accepted the other kids’ argument that he failed to tag them properly, but often seemed frustrated at his inability to verbalize his concerns about the apparently changing rules of the game.

As the examples with “tag” and “monster” show, context markers are used to frame games as a whole as well as to frame single elements within these games. In this sense, saying

“tag” while touching another kid was an action within the game of tag, but simultaneously served as a context marker by signalling the initiation of the game itself. Interpreting the utterances “monster” and “tag” as context markers depended on knowing the correct frame of interpretation. Even if Kyle understood the metacommunicative function of the expression “tag” accompanied by a touch as initiating a game of tag, he did not generalize from this to consider it an in-game cue as well.

The convergence of frames was not always a prerequisite for successful communication, however, as illustrated by the next example. A few weeks after the incident described above, Felipe was playing with another group of kids, this time with no apparent conflict.

Felipe chases Asim and three other boys around the school yard. Asim approaches me and asks me to tie his shoe, and I ask him what they are doing. He tells me they are playing “monster”, and that Felipe is the monster: “He’s chasing the good guys”. As Asim runs off to continue their game, the bell rings. The kids start lining up near the entrance door, and I approach Felipe to ask him about this sudden shift in his attitude towards playing “monster”. As the teacher leads the class back into the school building, Felipe tells me that Asim and the other kids were “bad guys”. When I ask him about his own part in the game, Felipe tells me he was “Spiderman”.

Ochs (1988:7) argues that “having partially different understandings of a social activity does not seem to preclude participating in that activity (if we can still refer to it as the same activity)”. In this example, successful interaction was facilitated not by the convergence of frames, but by the *assumed* shared definition of the situation. Felipe and Asim served as props in each other’s game, mutually supporting each other’s activity without actually agreeing on what they were doing. The polysemy of words such as “tag” and “monster”, or “soccer” and “basketball”, often made it difficult for the kids to adjust to others’ frames of interpretation, but did not preclude them from playing together. This illustrates the advantage of considering Schwartzman’s distinction between “play” and “game” as a difference in *attitude* rather than a difference in the type of *activity*, because two participants can have different ideas about whether the ongoing activity is, in fact, play.

## Fabrications

The classroom, unlike the cafeteria and the school yard, was by many kids considered to be largely dominated by teacher authority. When in the classroom, therefore, the kids would often adapt their play to the demands made by the teachers. For instance, whereas running and chasing routines were prevalent in the school yard, the kids would turn to more subtle activities such as verbal joking and imaginative play in the classroom. Many of the kindergartners talked considerably less in the presence of teachers than among their peers, and, when they did talk, often used a more monotonous and slow paced voice than they would do among their peers. Such exaggerated prosody was similar to how some teachers would speak slowly and emphasize particular words when teaching, and can be seen as an attempt by these kindergartners to adjust to the changing frameworks when moving from unofficial to official school worlds.

Other kids, such as Naeem, adapted to these shifting demands without compromising much on either prosody or choice of subject. One day the teacher brought her puppy to the classroom, and asked the kids to help her name it. When she had listed the alternatives, Naeem asked “Can you call him Naeem?” to much amusement to the other kids. By bringing the name joking routine from the unofficial to the official school world, Naeem backed up his reputation as “funny guy” among the other kids. Goffman (1987:56) refers to similar activities as “secondary adjustments”, defined as “practices that do not directly challenge staff but allow inmates to obtain forbidden satisfactions or to obtain permitted ones by forbidden means”. Goffman (1987:56) argues that secondary adjustments provide people in institutions with evidence that they still have “some control of [their] environment”, and, as such, provide “a kind of lodgement for the self”. Whereas a few kids would engage in clear violations of the school rules, Naeem skilfully circumvented the teacher’s insistence that the kids should “play outside” by bending rather than breaking the rule, thereby avoiding potential sanctions.

During classroom instruction, the teacher would sometimes point out the significance of names and naming. For instance, during “sharing time” on Fridays, when the kids brought toys and other objects from home to present to the class, the teacher would often ask them about the names of their dolls, teddy bears, and action figures. When Nelson presented his new toy turtle, the teacher asked him “Have you named it yet?” Nelson waited a few seconds, and then replied “Junior”. He then changed his mind and said “No ... wait ... Bruce”. The other kids laughed and nodded in reply to Nelson’s reference to the turtles in the movie “Finding Nemo”, which they had watched in the classroom only a few days earlier. Other kids

were less willing to name their toys during sharing time. Estrella presented a teddy bear to the class, and said “It’s my teddy bear”. When the teacher asked her about its name, Estrella replied “I don’t know”. The teacher encouraged her to name it, but Estrella repeated that she did not know the teddy bear’s name. After several attempts to recast her question in front of an increasingly uncomfortable Estrella, the teacher accepted Estrella’s strained reply “My bear’s name is teddy bear”.

As already stated, names served both as fixed identity markers and as arbitrary labels that could be manipulated. By presenting them with an opportunity to name their toys, the teacher encouraged the kids to see names as fluid and flexible entities. When Nelson changed his mind about the turtle’s name, he appropriately interpreted the teacher’s question as an encouragement to create a name label. Estrella’s reluctance to name her teddy bear indicates how she interpreted the teacher’s question to be a matter of revealing the bear’s real name, which, as she said, she did not know. It appears that the difference between naming as “creative action” (Bodenhorn and Vom Bruck 2006:10) on the one hand, and applying a particular label on the other hand, can provide a useful distinction when examining the significance of communicational flexibility both among the kids and between the kids and their teachers.

It is now time to return to the earlier incident where Nelson referred to Felipe as “Felipi”. By applying Goffman’s (1974) distinction between “keying” and “fabrication” to this episode, it becomes possible to consider polysemy to be a resource, making it possible for Nelson to transform play activities from the school yard and apply them in the official school world. Goffman suggests that a fabrication, unlike a keying, leads participants to have different ideas about what is going on. Importantly, keying and fabrication can occur simultaneously, such as when the other kids laughed at name jokes whereas Felipe and other kids considered them gravely insulting. Goffman (1974:112) makes a further distinction by arguing that whereas “deception” is “falsehood intendedly produced”, “illusion” can be understood as “error resulting from a misconstruing that no one induced purposely”. Such illusions are a common product of polysemy in conversation.

The argument here is that Nelson’s fabrication was a deliberate deception, not an accidental illusion. Nelson was aware of Felipe’s tendency to respond with anger when someone called him “Felipi”, and he also knew that the teacher was highly attentive to Felipe’s aggression, after several occasions on which he had physically attacked other kids. Many of the instances when the kids called him “Felipi” took place in the classroom, in the teacher’s presence, rather than in the cafeteria or the school yard. Nelson, and sometimes

other kids, would approach Felipe with no other apparent purpose than calling him “Felipi”, and, knowing that he would respond aggressively, would then run to the teacher to “tell” on him if he threatened to attack them. The kids knew that they only had to get the teacher’s attention to put a stop to the threat. Sometimes the kids who initiated the “Felipi” game seemed to calculate the initiation to when the teacher was close enough to sanction Felipe, but still too far away to hear the person calling him “Felipi”.

Again, it seems evident that play is best understood not as an activity, but as an attitude. Nelson seemed to use the term “Felipi” as a context marker, similar to saying “tag” or “monster” outside the classroom, thereby triggering Felipe’s predictable anger. Nelson’s escape as Felipe attempted to hit him is also similar to how the kids, during “tag” or “monster”, would approach a dangerous situation, only to retreat at the last moment. Felipe provided the other kids with an opportunity to transgress the border between imaginative play and reality, because Felipe’s tendency to act violently represented a similar merging of real and pretend fear that was exhibited during “monster” play in the school yard. By hitting, Felipe went further than the monster in the game would ever do, and probably served to create an experience of fear for Nelson more realistic than he could have achieved through play in the school yard. At the same time, the teacher was never far away, and represented the safety that was necessary for Nelson’s play not to turn into real danger.

Nelson used elements from “tag” and “monster” as well as from name joking, and created a play situation in the classroom where both Felipe and the teacher served as props rather than participants in the activity. Noting that Nelson was not sanctioned for breaking the rules about running and screaming in the classroom, the Felipi episode can serve to exemplify what Goffman (1987:189) refers to as “working the system”; “the exploitation of a whole routine of official activity for private ends”. Goffman (1987:191) points out that “in order to work a system effectively, one must have an intimate knowledge of it”. The routinized, and therefore predictable, responses of both Felipe and the teacher in this perspective served as resources for Nelson, who repeated the “Felipi” routine in the classroom a number of times with a similar outcome.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter I have discussed naming practices among the kindergartners. I have considered the uses of names in different school environments, and discussed how elements from each environment were transformed as they crossed the boundaries between official and unofficial

worlds. I have argued that names sometimes served as markers of identity, providing the kids with a fixed sign for referring to themselves or others. However, this disambiguating aspect of names was sometimes countered by the capacity of names to become detached from their holders. This allowed for manipulation by those who considered names to be arbitrary and negotiable labels. This ambiguity can serve as a key to understand the potential for both cooperation and conflict that names represent, and thereby to illuminate how relationships are established, maintained, and manipulated. Spoken language should not be considered only in terms of social structures which children are socialized into, but should also be seen as a set of resources, used by children to maneuver and manipulate social relations.

The term “frame” (Goffman 1974; Gumperz 1992; Bateson 2000) was applied to the kindergartners’ manipulation of play elements, and highlighted the capacity of some kids to creatively bend rules based on their familiarity with social conventions. The argument that the kids actively negotiated frames points forward to the following chapters, where a similar perspective will be applied not only to the kids’ interaction with each other, but also to their interaction with written text. In the next chapter I will discuss the role of names in early literacy acquisition, and the significance of metalinguistic awareness for the kindergartners’ approaches to text.

## Chapter 3

### Textual landmarks

---

In the previous chapter I illustrated how the kids' names were significant markers of identity, and served as resources in their conversation and play. In this chapter I will add another dimension by considering written representations of the kindergartners' names. Following Street's (1995) suggestion that literacy should be understood primarily in terms of "practices" rather than as the acquisition of "skills", I describe how reading and writing activities from the official school world were incorporated into the kids' play. In the process, these activities were creatively transformed to fit the kindergartners' particular interests and values. I will argue that letters and words, and in particular those associated with the kids' own names, served as anchoring devices, allowing the kindergartners to make connections between new experiences and familiar routines.

The kindergartners had different ideas about the forms and functions of written language, and their "hypotheses" (Ferreiro 1986) or "schemas" (Tannen 1993) had consequences for the kids' abilities to construct and maintain shared frames of interaction. An analysis of the role of text in the kids' daily lives therefore necessitates a consideration of both cognitive literacy skills and social literacy practices. In order to investigate the implications of these individual differences, I will consider the distinction between name drawing and name writing, as well as the polysemic nature of terms like "name" and "word". Whereas some kids treated "names" as particular examples of the more general category "words", others saw names as idiosyncratic markers of identity with little or no connection to other pieces of text.

#### **"The guessing game"**

The school bell rings, signalling the beginning of afternoon recess. Like grains of sand flowing through an hourglass, hundreds of kids squeeze through the main door and spread across the school yard. Some run towards the basketball court to the north, others head straight for the slides on the play structure near the middle of the school yard. Kara, Kyle,

and I sit down on a bench near the slides. Vanessa approaches us and asks “Espen can I play the guessing game in your book?” I tell her “Sure”, and hand over my pen and my notebook. She asks Kara and Kyle to “scoot over” so she can sit between them, and they watch carefully as Vanessa opens the book and finds a blank page. She rests the pen on the page for a few seconds before writing her name near the top, followed by four horizontal lines near the bottom of the page. Announcing “This word has four letters” she turns to Kyle, who has been watching attentively, and tells him to “Guess a letter”. Kyle says “L”, and Vanessa shakes her head and says “No L”. She then writes the letter “L” near the middle of the page, and asks Kara to “Guess a letter”. Kara says “K”, and Vanessa replies “Yes there *is* a K”, emphasizing the word “*is*” like the teacher usually does when playing “hangman”, the classroom equivalent to the guessing game. Kara giggles, and Vanessa writes a “K” above the first horizontal line. Kara exclaims “I know I know”, and almost pushes Vanessa off the bench as she asks enthusiastically “Is it Kara?” Vanessa nods, and both girls again giggle as Vanessa writes the missing letters “a r a” on the remaining lines. Kara says “My turn”, and reaches for the notebook. Like Vanessa, Kara draws four horizontal lines near the bottom of the page, and says “Four letters” as she holds the book up for Vanessa and Kyle to see. Vanessa counts the horizontal lines, and asks “Is there a K?” Kara writes a “K” near the top of the page, and replies “No K”. Vanessa looks puzzled as she again counts the horizontal lines, and Kara turns to Kyle and says “Guess a letter”. Kyle says “A”, and she confirms “Yes there *is* an A”. Kara writes an “a” on the third line from the left, and Vanessa moves closer. Kara smiles, and looks as if she wants to say something. Vanessa opens her mouth, but is interrupted by Kara who exclaims “It’s my brother, his name is Noah”. Vanessa shakes her head and protests “No, your brother’s name is Kalvin. He’s over there” as she points to a group of second graders on the slides. Kara responds “Yes but I have a new brother. He’s a baby. Yesterday my dad showed me a photo of him”. Vanessa and Kyle lean forward as Kara adds the missing letters to spell “Noah”, and they watch without a word as Kara turns to a blank page and carefully draws her brother, and then writes his name below the drawing.

Kara and Vanessa’s fascination with text was shared by most of the kindergartners, but few others initiated games like “the guessing game” as frequently as the two. Often, a crowd of kids would gather around Kara and Vanessa as they played one of their games, or the two girls would approach others to include them in their game. Kyle, for instance, seldom initiated literacy-related activities unless a teacher asked him to, but often participated when Kara and Vanessa played games such as the guessing game. As illustrated above, Kara and Vanessa used each other’s names, but they also included names of other friends and family members in the activity. All the kindergartners knew how to represent their own name in writing, and could



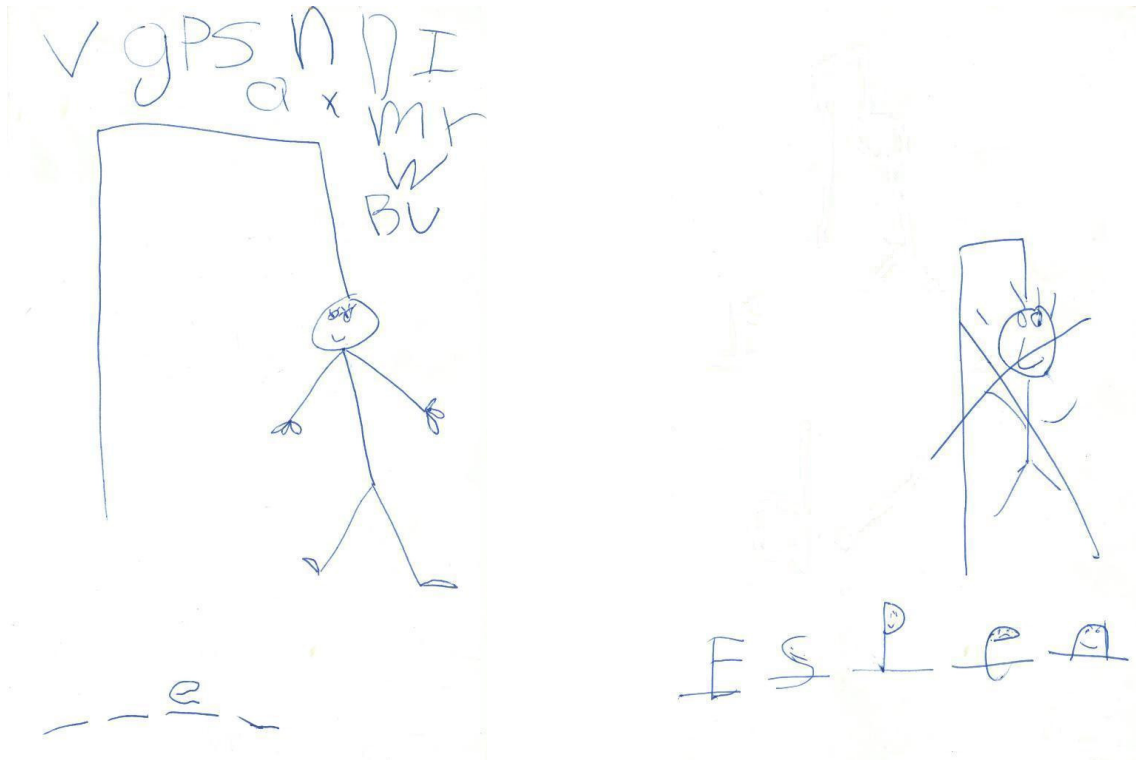


Figure 2: Two examples of “the guessing game”. The purpose of the game is to guess which letters are represented by the horizontal lines near the bottom, and for each incorrect guess a body part is added to the person. The game ends in one of two ways; either when the entire word is revealed, or when the drawing is completed. The game was popular among the kids, and highly similar to what the kindergarten teacher referred to as “hangman”. As illustrated in the drawing on the left, however, a number of features such as shoes, fingers, and eyelids, which were not applied in the official school world, were added to the game when played in unofficial school worlds.

---

therefore participate in Kara and Vanessa’s games even if they did not necessarily share the two girls’ interest in the more challenging and time consuming aspects of reading and writing.

There were both similarities and differences between the school yard “guessing game” and the classroom game “hangman”. Both versions made use of text and other visual cues to guide the players’ attention, and in both games the objective was to reveal a hidden word by guessing which letters were represented by the horizontal lines. When the teacher played the game, she did not use the kids’ names. Instead, she used words such as “play”, “she”, “said”, “my”, “see”, and “like”. These were termed “high frequency words” in the official school world, and the teacher explicitly told the kids that she wanted them to be able to read and write twenty high frequency words by the end of kindergarten. Kara and Vanessa pragmatically

modified the activity as they introduced it in the unofficial school world, and consistently used names rather than high frequency words when playing the game.

As established in the previous chapter, the kids' names were important elements in much social interaction. Unlike most of the high frequency words, which were deictic terms with no obvious denotation, the names of the kids' friends and family members corresponded to persons in their real lives. Their selective appropriation of elements from the official school world illustrates the usefulness of Corsaro's (1992) model of "interpretive reproduction". Corsaro argues that children should not be considered passive recipients of adults' socializing attempts, but active agents who negotiate and choose among the elements presented to them. In Corsaro's perspective, socialization takes place not only between adults and children; children also "socialize each other" (Corsaro 1992:162). He argues that ethnographers should be careful not to overestimate the role of adults in children's literacy acquisition, and that the uses of literacy among peers should be seen as "equally important to both the literacy process and to socialization" (Corsaro and Nelson 2003:210-211). Rather than considering Kara and Vanessa's "guessing game" to be a more or less successful attempt at mimicking the adult world, it can be seen as a playful and creative act of interpretive reproduction. Kara and Vanessa's playful manipulation of the classroom activity serves as a useful reminder that "a child's goal is not to become a successful adult (...) A child's goal is to be a successful child" (Harris 1998:198).

At the same time, the above example illustrates how children's activities, although creative and playful, take place within a conventionalized world of signs. When compared to adults around them, children in general have little power over written representations of their own names. When they learn to read and write their own names, however, this power relation is somewhat transformed. For instance, when two second graders attempted to take Sebastian's soccer ball, he held it up and showed them the name "SEBASTIAN" written on the ball. The two kids accepted this, and left without further protest. Whereas they had challenged Sebastian's *possession* of the ball, they quickly retreated when they were up against the more abstract concept of *ownership* signalled by Sebastian's referral to the name label.

The above examples illustrate how the kids' familiarity with their written names allowed them to construct conceptual bridges between textual and social worlds. For instance, Kara expanded on her familiarity with text by incorporating her brother's name into her repertoire of written names. Her dad had returned a week earlier to live with Kara's mom, after having spent several years in Guatemala. Kara had told the other kids about how her

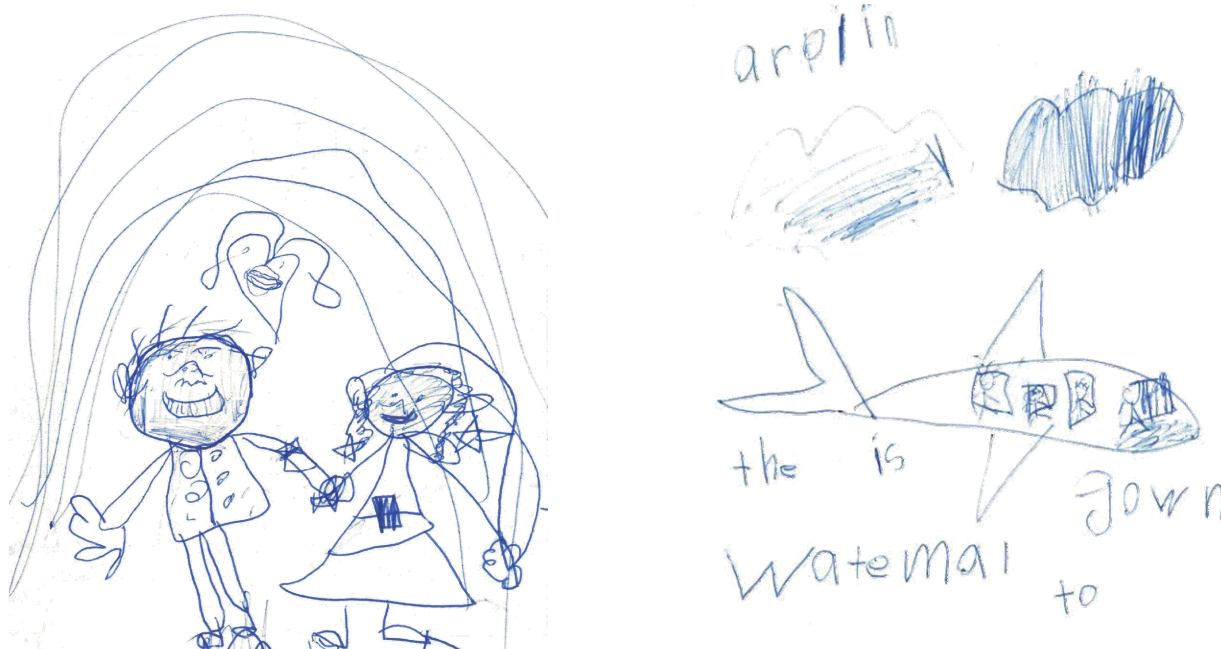


Figure 3: When her dad returned after several years abroad, Kara made a number of drawings related to the changes taking place in her life. On the left, Kara’s mom and dad are depicted getting married beneath a rainbow. On the right, Kara’s family is on an airplane, accompanied by the text “The airplane is going to Guatemala”.

---

mom and dad were “back together”, and during the week she had produced at least a dozen drawings of her mom in a bridal gown, holding her dad’s hand. The latest development was presented in the above episode, when Kara told Kyle and Vanessa that she now had “a new brother”, Noah, who lived with his mother in Guatemala. During the following days she drew a number of family portraits, always with her mom and dad holding hands, and she drew herself along with her mom, dad, and Calvin in an airplane “going to Guatemala” to visit Noah. Sometimes the size of the stick figure, or an element such as her mom’s earrings, offered clues to who was depicted. The most distinguishing feature, however, was Kara’s habit of writing the name of each depicted person next to them.

Kara knew how to spell Noah’s name only one day after she was told about his existence. Her use of Noah’s written name in the guessing game illustrates the point made by Stephen Trimble (1994), that children make use of what they already know about the world when they approach the unknown. Trimble (1994:22) argues that children’s conceptions about the world are dominated by the “tension between the old and the new, safety versus growth”. He refers to this tension as a process of “mental map-making” in which children construct and navigate by familiar “landmarks”. Whereas Trimble is primarily concerned with children’s

navigation in nature, Dyson (1999:162) extends the meaning of the term “landmark” to refer to how children approach text in what she refers to as “the symbol-strewn landscape of classrooms”. The most palpable example of textual landmarks in the kids’ environment was the widespread use of name labels provided by teachers and caregivers. Their names were written or printed on many of their possessions, such as clothes, toys, work books, and lunch boxes. Being applied by adults, regardless of the kids’ actual ability to read, the use of name labels exemplify the point made by several researchers that literacy learning often begins long before formal schooling (Ferreiro and Teberosky 1982, Heath 1983). Children go through major changes throughout childhood, and yet their written names tend to remain the same; they therefore seem to represent stable elements in an otherwise fluid existence.

Approaching written language not primarily as a “code” but as a “symbolic tool”, Dyson (2001:126) argues that children learn “to differentiate and manipulate the elements of the written system (...) in order to engage with, and manipulate, the social world”. Reading and writing allowed the kids to construct a wide range of metonymic landmarks, such as when Kara wrote her brother’s name. In a sense, she brought Noah into existence by constructing a tangible landmark for conceptualizing, as well as talking about, a brother she had never seen in real life. As the example with Sebastian’s ball illustrates, the ability to construct textual landmarks marks a significant transition from navigating by landmarks constructed by others to navigating by landmarks of one’s own making. This transition can be seen as an important element in the kids’ gradual move towards independency from adults, because the symbolic nature of written names requires few material resources. As such, literacy provided “tools for social action” (Dyson 1993:77) by allowing for idiosyncratic interpretations of elements from the official school world.

## Words and names

The teacher says “Okay, it’s time to take attendance” and begins reading the kids’ names from an alphabetized list. The routine is repeated every morning, and the kids know that they are expected to reply “Here” when their name has been called. Halfway through the list she calls Naeem’s name. He says “Here”, and quickly adds a barely audible “Yes, I’m not last” as he closes his eyes in a gesture of gratitude. The teacher continues down towards the end of the list, and when Kyle’s name is called he asks with an angry voice “Why does my name always have to be last?” The teacher puts the list down, and explains how their last names are ordered “like the alphafriends”. She points to the letter-shaped animals on

the wall representing the letters of the alphabet, and tells Kyle “Your last name begins with an S”. Naeem adds “Like Sebastian”. Kyle looks unconvinced, and exclaims “But I didn’t do nothin’. Why do I have to be in the back?”

In the above episode Kyle protested at what he considered a punishment, and wanted to know the reason for always being put “in the back”. Kyle’s use of the term “in the back” rather than “at the bottom” may indicate a divergence between his and the teacher’s framing. The teacher usually applied the expression “in the back” when referring to their position in the line when walking to and from the classroom. Whereas she saw the list as alphabetically ordered from top to bottom, as indicated by her reference to the alphafriends and to Kyle’s last name, Kyle seemed to conceptualize the list as moving from “front” to “back”, with “front” being a more attractive position than “back”.

In the previous chapter, the boundaries created by language structures and social structures were found to be not only limiting, but also to allow for subversive activities such as “playing monster” in the classroom. In this example, Naeem’s comment “Yes I’m not last” presented an alternative to the teacher’s “taking attendance” frame, by indicating that being “last” was a disadvantageous position. Whether an intended deception or an incidental illusion, in Goffman’s (1974) terms, Naeem’s fabrication of an alternative frame seemed to trigger Kyle’s inquiry into the fairness of the teacher’s routine. The example supports the argument that literacy should be considered in terms of social practices as well as individual, cognitive skills, because the kids’ different conceptions of the functions of literacy were relevant for their negotiations of social status.

Purcell-Gates (*et al.* 2004:78) argues that in order to make sense of both the causes and the consequences of literacy, the study of literacy needs to consider “cognitive processes” as well as “social practice”. In order to conceptualize the cognitive aspects it is necessary to turn to developmental psychology, exemplified here through the research by Ferreiro (1986). Not unlike Corsaro’s model of interpretive reproduction, Ferreiro argues that children actively approach rather than passively internalize literacy, and claims that children work their way through “various hypotheses that are not idiosyncratic but developmentally ordered” (Ferreiro 1986:15-16).

Ferreiro’s perspective makes it possible to map the assumptions the kids had about the forms and functions of literacy. As such, these “hypotheses” are similar to what Tannen and Wallat (1993:60) refer to as “knowledge schemas”. Whereas “frame” refers to the immediate situation being negotiated, “schema” refers to the assumptions we rely on when constructing

and negotiating such frames (Tannen and Wallat 1993:62). Articulated schemas provide ethnographers with indications of informants' "expectations about people, objects, events, and settings in the world (Tannen and Wallat 1993:62), and as such constitute a tool that can be used to analyze frames of interaction. Besides showing how the teacher and Kyle differed in their schemas concerning named lists, Tannen's perspective also allows us to consider differences between the kids' schemas or hypotheses. Rather than a single, linear process of becoming literate, what we find is a number of "literacies" (Street 1995), each related both to individual, cognitive developments and to the socio-ideological context where such skills are applied. The following episode provides a clue towards understanding the kids' different conceptions of written names.

The teacher calls the kids' names and tells them to "sit on the rug". One by one they get up from their chairs and walk towards the rug in front of the teacher's board. The teacher sits down on her chair next to the board, and rings her bell to get the kids' attention. Announcing that they will be talking about the "Letter of the week", she picks up a laminated sheet of paper from beneath her chair. As she holds the sheet up in front of the kids, revealing a drawing of a K-shaped kangaroo, she explains: "Our new alphafriend's name is Keely Kangaroo". She then attaches the sheet to the board behind her, and writes the letter "K" with a black marker next to the alphafriend. Kyle exclaims "That's my name", pointing enthusiastically to the "K" on the board while turning to the kids sitting behind him. The teacher reminds Kyle to raise his hand if he wants to talk, and tells him he did "a good job making a connection". Ashkii says "Me too", and Kyle immediately turns to him and says "No it's not. Stop copying me". Ashkii nods repeatedly as he says "Yes it makes the sound /k/ /k/ /k/" while pointing to the board. The teacher interrupts, and explains how both Ashkii and Kyle have a "k" in their names. Kyle still seems unconvinced, and turns away from Ashkii with an angry look as he covers his ears with his hands.

Kyle, like Kara and Vanessa, responded with enthusiasm when he found his name in text. For instance, when he found his name printed on an invitation to their parents for a classroom "Valentine party", he eagerly approached two of his friends and asked them to find their own names on the list. The three boys spent several minutes scanning the invitation letter for the names of other classmates, a considerable amount when considering how little time these three kids usually spent reading and writing on their own initiative.

Being one of the first pieces of text most children learn how to read and write, first names have been argued to "help children grasp and manipulate written language concepts"

(Bloodgood 1999:363). Ferreiro and Teberosky (1982:178) argue that “the child’s own name is tremendously important” among many children learning to read and write, because their conceptions of how their first names are written are “progressively generalized to later include the names of objects”. The above episode illustrates how the letter “k” in Kyle’s name served metonymically as a representation of his entire name. The polysemic nature of the term “name” can be approached by applying Tannen’s concept of schemas. The divergence between Kyle and Ashkii’s schemas can be seen when Kyle takes offence at the idea that the letter “k” belongs not only to him, but to Ashkii as well. Kyle could recognize the written names of other kids as long as they did not begin with the same letter, but struggled when the first letter was shared by several kids, such as Naeem and Nelson. Ashkii and the teacher seemed to share the conception that letters represent sounds, as illustrated by Ashkii’s statement that the letter k “makes the sound /k/ /k/ /k/”. Kyle seemed to operate with a different set of schemas, in which the letter k was an idiosyncratic marker of identity. According to Ferreiro (1986:21), this attitude is common among children who consider letters “not linked to names but to persons, as being the property of particular persons”.

Names and individual letters can potentially serve as reference points, or landmarks, when children approach other texts. Bloodgood (1999:347) distinguishes between children who consider their name a “static entity”, with “little connection to other written forms”, and those who see their names as “tools” for further explorations of literacy. Kyle fits into Bloodgood’s first category, as indicated by his refusal to acknowledge that Ashkii, too, had the letter “k” in his name. Don, on the other hand, manipulated the letters of his name as well as other words. On one occasion, Don showed some of the kids how he could transform his name into “Ron”, the name of an older student, by replacing one letter. He pointed out how the two words “rhyme”, thus providing support for Bloodgood’s (1999:358) argument that “children who demonstrated greater control of name production were more knowledgeable in other literacy realms as well”. As Kara, Vanessa, and Don expanded on their uses of text to include other words, their names soon represented only a small part of their growing repertoire of textual meaning. Only a few of the kindergartners, including Kyle, did not seem to consider names to be written words when the kids left kindergarten in June. In the following section, Kyle’s ideas about the relationship between oral and written language will be treated in more detail.

## “Drawing”, “writing”, and “scribble scrabble”

The teacher sits down in her chair, and asks the kids to gather on the rug in front of her before she announces “free choice”. One by one she lists the kids’ names. Some of them head straight for the “blocks” corner, others to the “kitchen”, and some walk restlessly between the different areas of the classroom as they try to decide among the available options. Vanessa, Kyle, and Don decide they want to “play school”, and approach the “school” area where four chairs face a miniature copy of the teacher’s board as well as a matching pointer. Kyle sits down on one of the chairs in front of the board, and Don asks Vanessa “Can I be the teacher?” She replies “No I’m gonna be the teacher but you can be the substitute”. Don waits a few seconds, and then suggests “I’ll be the police officer”. This time he does not wait for Vanessa’s approval, and instead runs to the costume chest where he finds the police hat and vest. When he returns, Vanessa is already engaged in her role as “teacher”, and is pointing to a picture of a car on the board. Kyle says “car”, and Vanessa moves the pointer to a card with the word “is”, which she has put next to the car picture. Kyle replies “drive”, and Vanessa corrects him: “No, this says *is*”. Kyle and Don both pay close attention as Vanessa adds another card to the board. She points to the word “here”, and waits for Kyle to respond. Vanessa taps the pointer repeatedly at the board, but Kyle just smiles and shows no indication that he is going to reply. Vanessa turns her pointer to Kyle, and pokes him in the chest as she says “If you don’t say this you won’t learn”. Kyle laughs as he defends himself from Vanessa’s unexpected move, and he asks “Can I have a blue ticket?” Vanessa stops poking Kyle, but still uses her disciplinary “teacher” voice as she replies “No you can’t have any blue tickets”. She adds, now in a gentler tone, “Maybe we can make some”, and then walks to the “writing station” nearby. Kyle and Don join her, and soon the three kids are engaged in cutting rectangular pieces of paper resembling the blue tickets awarded by teachers for good behavior. Vanessa tells Kyle “Now we need to write”, and Don keeps cutting as Vanessa and Kyle begin decorating the tickets with text. Kyle quickly writes his name, and adds a number of letter-like lines, curves, and circles before moving on to the next ticket. Vanessa writes slowly, sometimes stopping to repeat a sound when she is uncertain, and spells out “blu tikt for Vanessa”. Kyle finishes his fourth ticket by the time Vanessa is done with her first, and he stops his work to look at her ticket as she is adding happy faces to some of the letters. He asks “Why do you write your name long like that?” Vanessa giggles as she replies “I have a long name”. Kyle waits, as if expecting an elaboration from Vanessa. She smiles but says nothing, and after a few seconds Kyle says “Oh” and turns his gaze back on his own blue ticket.

Like the guessing game described earlier, the above episode illustrates how the kids incorporated elements from the official school world into their play. When “playing school”, the kids adopted elements that they considered relevant into the ongoing activity, while



ignoring or transforming elements that they considered less suitable for the task at hand. Applying Goffman's term, the episode exemplifies a "keying" of an official classroom activity into the unofficial world. In the official school world, the teachers awarded good behavior with "blue tickets". These were small, rectangular pieces of blue paper, and the teachers would write the names of individual kids on the tickets and authenticate them by adding their own signature. Some of the kids accumulated as much as thirty such tickets during a single week, and brought them to the school's "store" once a month to exchange them for stickers, writing utensils, or toys. The fact that the blue tickets were signed with the individual kids' names made them unsuitable for trade, and the use of such tickets among the kids was restricted to their activities during imaginative play such as "playing school". One exception to this pattern occurred when Naeem unsuccessfully attempted to forge the teacher's signature on an unsigned ticket he had found.

Marie Clay (1991:32) distinguishes between "writing" and "drawing" by pointing out that although both are "symbolic", only "drawing is obvious in its attempts to represent things in the world or in imaginary worlds". For young children learning to read and write, she argues, "it is not immediately obvious what writing substitutes for" (Clay 1991:32). The transition from pictographic to orthographic representations requires children to control a "second level of abstraction as they come to understand that written symbols stand for the spoken word that represents the concrete item or action" (Bloodgood 1999:345). Teachers depended on a similar distinction as Clay and Bloodgood, between two levels of symbolic representation. The kids, however, seemed to have different conceptions of what the terms "drawing" and "writing" referred to. Not all the kids shared the teacher's ideas about the principles of alphabetic writing, and their uses of the terms "drawing" and "writing" can therefore serve as surface evidence of their underlying ideas about the forms and functions of literacy. Felipe, for instance, once said "I'm gonna write the caterpillar", and then attended to what the teacher would refer to as "drawing". Similarly, when the teacher was reading a book with the kids, and asked them "What does it mean to illustrate a story?", Kara raised her hand and replied "To write". The teacher then proceeded to tell them about the difference between the role of the "illustrator" and the "author" by pointing to the drawings and the text in the book.

Kyle's question to Vanessa about why she writes her name "long" indicates what Tannen and Wallat (1993:58) refer to as a "mismatch of knowledge schemas". Whereas Kyle wrote what has been called "mock letters" (Bloodgood 1999:358), Vanessa attended to a different, and academically more appropriate, set of rules by using "invented spelling" based

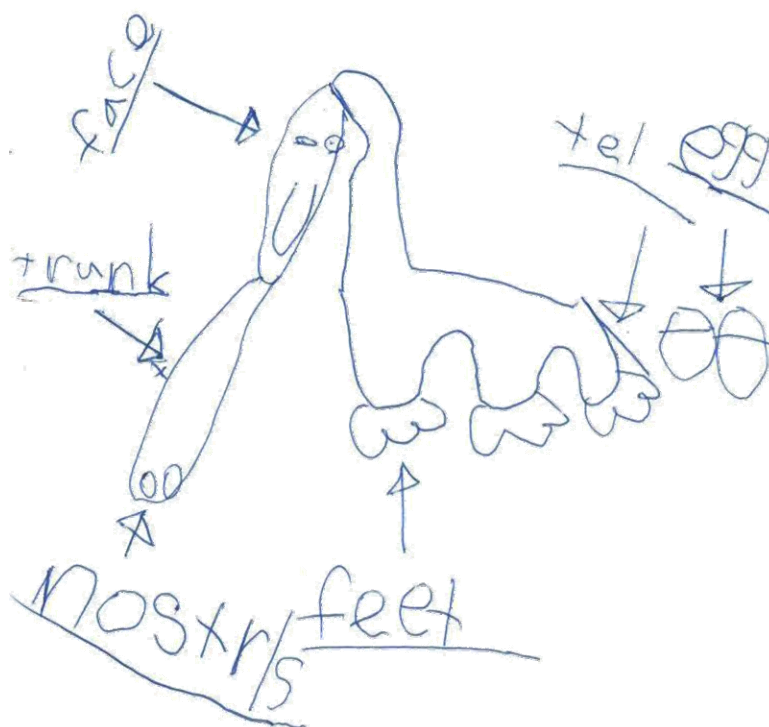


Figure 4: Vanessa’s drawing of an elephant, including names for various body parts. Having changed her mind about the “egg” when the ethnographer pointed out that elephants usually do not lay eggs, she later told Kara it was “poop”.

---

on the principle that sounds and letters are related (Whitehurst and Lonigan 2001:17-18). Whereas Vanessa was making props for their imaginative play, Kyle was still working within a pretend frame. In a sense, Kyle took the “pretend” aspect of their play one step further than Vanessa did, by making pretend letters on the pretend tickets. When Kyle stepped out of the pretend frame and asked Vanessa why she wrote her name “long like that”, his question indicates that he did not consider written names to be made up of letters representing individual sounds. He seems instead to have treated Vanessa’s term “write” as synonymous with the term “draw”, apparently having no reason to distinguish between the two. This indicates that the mismatch can be understood in terms of what Bloodgood (1999:364) refers to as “the alphabetic principle”; the idea that letters are related to spoken sounds, and that written sequences are related to spoken utterances. The teacher explicitly advocated the alphabetic principle by asking the kids to “Sound out the letters and put them together to a word” when they wanted to write something. It appears that the kids, far from having a

shared idea of what was implied by terms like “writing”, must be assumed to have idiosyncratic notions of the functions as well as the forms of written language.

Kyle seemed to consider names to be idiosyncratic symbols representing people or objects, where the first, and biggest, symbol was highly significant, whereas the other letters were less important, or even irrelevant, for the understanding of other types of text. A key to understanding how both Vanessa and Kyle wrote their names conventionally, yet had different conceptions of their names, is found in Ferreiro’s (1986:24n) argument that “we should be careful to distinguish between the drawing of letters and the writing”. Kyle did not write his name in the example above; he drew it. Kyle knew how to draw the logogram of his name, but was unaware of the relation between oral and written representations of it. Another indication is found in the drawing of “Spiderman” in Figure 5, where Kyle depended on his memorization of letters from the logo rather than attempting to spell the word, resulting in the sequence “PSMN”. Vanessa’s control of the alphabetic principle made Kyle’s question redundant, because she was aware of the correspondence between the length of the spoken and written representations of her name. Kyle, who did not control the alphabetic principle, thus missed an opportunity to make generalizations that were often applied by Vanessa, who, like Don, would apply spelling conventions familiar from her own name when approaching new words.

Many kids would combine drawing and writing as they decorated their names with happy faces, hearts, flowers, and stars, and they sometimes seemed to consider the aesthetic aspect to be as important, if not more important, than the actual meaning of the written text. The assumed linearity of the hypotheses proposed by Ferreiro is challenged by Elizabeth Sulzby (1986:68), who argues that “rather than drawing preceding writing developmentally (...) children are learning to differentiate marking to the two representation systems”. On several occasions, Don could be seen scribbling his name in mock writing on the classroom work sheets. This was not because he did not know how to write his name, but seemingly because he preferred to spend the available time on working on the actual work sheet rather than carefully writing his name. Unlike Kyle’s mock writing on the blue tickets, Don’s mock writing was a matter of deliberate deviance. This example shows the futility of only looking at the products of children’s writing in order to understand their conceptions of reading and writing. Instead, the use of text in early literacy must be analyzed as it comes into existence, characterized by the blending of seemingly separate modes of communication such as drawing and writing.

The futility of operating only with a distinction between drawing and writing when

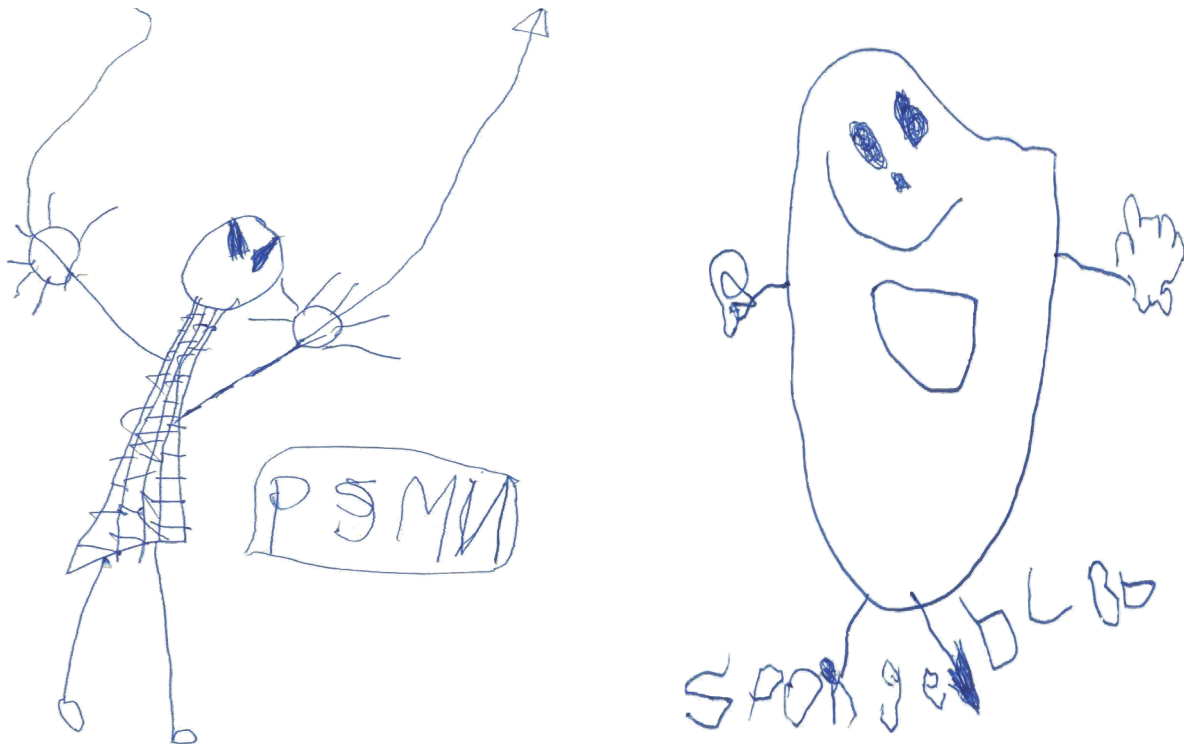


Figure 5: The kindergartners' fascination with fictional characters is obvious in the above drawings. "Spiderman" was drawn by Kyle, and "Spongebob" was drawn by Asim. Kyle did not follow the teacher's suggestion to "sound out" the individual phonemes of the word he wanted to write, relying instead on his visual memorization of the logo from the new Spiderman 3 movie.

---

approaching children's literacy becomes obvious when considering a third category used by the kids, called "scribble scrabble". Vanessa used the term "scribble scrabble" about all indecipherable text, regardless of whether it was printed Chinese or Kyle's handwriting, and explained that the term referred to "something you can't read". As it turned out, the term "scribble scrabble" was applied almost exclusively by the kids who regularly attended to the alphabetic principle when handling text, or, in other words, those who shared the official school world's distinction between drawing and writing. To others, like Kyle, there were no evident boundaries between "scribble scrabble" and "writing", because he did not rely on the alphabetic principle to encode or decode text. Learning to read and write alphabetic script appears to involve learning to control specific skills such as the alphabetic principle, because it is necessary to be able to switch between considering symbols as denoting the object's *name* and as denoting the actual *object*.

## Talking about text

Aricela and I are seated on a bench near the slides after lunch, and we watch Kara and Vanessa as they run towards us from the cafeteria. Vanessa is carrying her notebook in one hand and a pen in the other, and with Kara only a few feet behind she stops in front of Aricela. Gasping for air she asks Aricela “God or the devil?” while holding the pen up to her notebook. Vanessa tightens her grip around the pen as Aricela opens her mouth, but Aricela does not respond to the question, and instead looks curiously at the notebook. Kara adds impatiently “You have to vote for god or the devil”. Aricela says “Let me see it”, and holds her hand out towards Vanessa, the palm of her hand facing up as if she is already holding the book. Vanessa reluctantly hands the book over to Aricela. The page is divided into two equal halves by a vertical line going from top to bottom. The words “god” and “devil” are written on each side of the line near the top. Kara explains “This word is god and this word is the devil” as she points to each of the words. Kara and Vanessa appear to have voted already; both their names are written in the left column, beneath the word “god”. Vanessa asks “Who do you vote for?” and Aricela looks up with a grin as she says “Devil”. Kara and Vanessa protest with a loud and synchronized “No”, and Kara explains with a serious voice “You can’t vote for him. He’s the bad guy”. Vanessa adds “Yeah, he’s mean”. Aricela still smiles as she changes her mind and says “God”. Vanessa approves by handing the pen to Aricela, who writes her name below the two others. Vanessa grabs the book and pen, and runs towards the kids playing near the slides. She repeats the phrase “God or devil” several times as Kara attempts to catch up with her.

In the above episode, Kara and Vanessa introduced a new activity to the other kids called “voting”. Like “the guessing game”, this routine had its origin in the official school world, where the teacher applied a similar activity to involve the kids in decisions such as whether to “keep the dollhouse in the classroom”. Kara and Vanessa did not seem much concerned with whether the vote was “fair” in the teacher’s sense, and the act of collecting names often appeared more important than the subsequent announcement of a winner. Voting, like the guessing game, exemplifies how elements from the official school world were given new meanings in the peer group through interpretive reproduction. The transformation of the classroom voting into an idiosyncratic play activity supports the argument made by Corsaro (1997:18) that “children are not simply internalizing society and culture, but are actively *contributing to cultural production and change*”.

The interplay of oral and written language has been a recurrent element in all episodes described so far in this chapter. In many instances when the kids drew or wrote in solitude, such as when Vanessa wrote “I am going to have a dog” beneath a drawing of herself with a

dog, the kids immediately proceeded to share their drawings with others. Vanessa, for instance, first read the text for other kids, and then elaborated verbally on her dad's promise to give her a dog. As argued by Corsaro and Nelson (2003), becoming literate should primarily be considered a social activity. In the voting episode, Vanessa's insistence that Aricela could not vote for the devil because "he's mean" illustrates how specific values were communicated not directly through text, but through the language accompanying the text. Rather than treating the oral and the written as distinct modes of communication, they are better seen as overlapping repertoires from which the kids created and negotiated their social realities.

It can be argued that text, rather than being the focus of attention, most often served as a *prism* through which other subjects were talked about. This was evident in both official and unofficial school worlds, as text often served to direct participants' awareness towards a particular topic. In the classroom, this approach was evident during the teacher's book reading with the kids. She would stop reading whenever she could engage the kids in conversations about the relationship between text and pictures, and would encourage them to discuss issues such as emotions and racism. These joint book readings are therefore more aptly described as reading *with* rather than reading *to* the kids. The kids also used text as a way to focus attention on particular subjects or personal experience, such as when Kara came late for school because she had been to the doctor, and portrayed herself with a needle in her arm and tears coming down her cheeks, accompanied by the line "I got a shot". She then handed the drawing to Vanessa, and told her about the incident. Rather than a simple dichotomy of the oral and the written, what we have is a complex interplay of bodily, oral, written, and drawn signs.

Whereas explicit discussions about the metalinguistic aspect of text, such as when Kyle and Ashkii discussed the letter "k" in an above episode, were not very common among the kids, metalinguistic terms were often used when talking about other subjects. Sometimes the use of text allowed for a switching of frames from talking *through* the text to talking *about* the text. This was evident in the blue ticket-episode, where Kyle's question about Vanessa's "long" name indicated a change from a play frame to a metalinguistic discussion about written language forms. Similarly, Vanessa's notebook can be considered a tool for constructing and negotiating frames, in which the written signs allowed for talk about text as well as about the activity at hand.

In the above episode, Kara's reference to the "words" god and devil took place within a play frame, but still commented on the metalinguistic aspect of the two terms as "words". The metalinguistic aspects of text and talk can thus not easily be distinguished from other dimensions, because many of the terms we use, such as "letter" and "word", are by definition

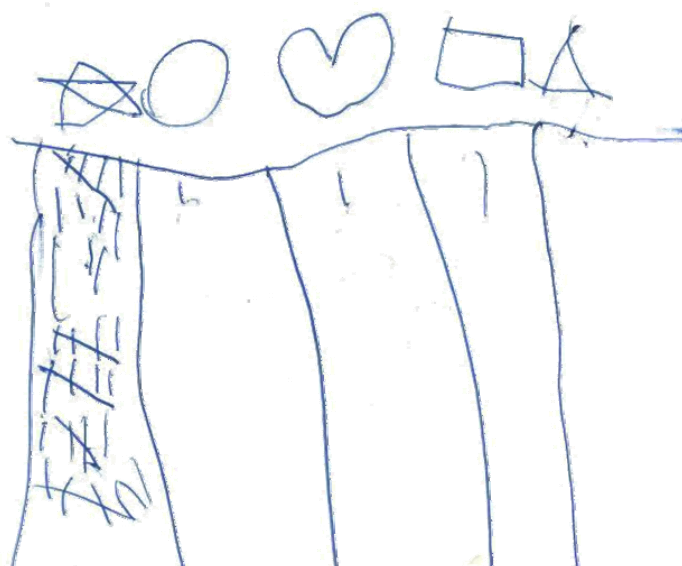


Figure 6: A “vote” of shape preferences conducted by Kara and Vanessa. Whereas they used single lines to indicate individual votes in this particular survey, they usually wrote the names of each individual kid. Both variants, with names and with lines, were used by the teacher in the classroom.

---

metalinguistic terms, because they direct attention towards language itself. Olson (1991:258) argues that the use of terms such as “word” promotes reflection on language itself, which he terms “metalinguistic ability”. In his perspective, the concept of “word” refers to an abstraction made possible by alphabetic literacy. Like the term “letter” in Kara and Vanessa’s guessing game, the term “word” was used by both teachers and kids to denote speech units as well as units of text. The term “word” is a polysemic sign, as it can refer both to units of speech and to units of text without making explicit which level of discourse is intended.

Even though correlations have been found, no definite causal link has been established regarding whether literacy presupposes or leads to metalinguistic awareness. For instance, Jean Peccei (2006:34) argues on the one hand that “literacy (...) rapidly increases children’s level of metalinguistic awareness”, but she also points out that “bilingual children (...) tend to have a more highly developed metalinguistic awareness than monolingual children” (Peccei 2006:40). Similarly, Street (1995:22) argues that people who “are in contact with or themselves speak a variety of different languages” are “likely to have developed a language for talking about language”. Despite the difficulties involved in determining the causality involved, certain metalinguistic skills, such as the ability to distinguish phonemes in oral language, seem important to beginning readers. In particular, the kids who shared the

teachers' schemas concerning the difference between "drawing" and "writing" appeared to have a marked advantage over those kids, like Kyle, who did not share the conventional view on such distinctions.

## Conclusion

I have provided examples of how the kindergartners transformed elements from the official school world as they incorporated text into their play. The kids' names often served as significant landmarks in these activities, and thus provided powerful markers of identity and ownership. I have considered some of the hypotheses or schemas the kids made use of when constructing and negotiating frames of interaction, and argued that some of the kids did not follow the teacher's convention of distinguishing between what she referred to as "words" and "names", or between "drawing" and "writing".

I have discussed the role of written names as literacy tools. Some kids used names when approaching other elements of literacy, and some used names to manipulate social frames using literacy conventions. In this way, the kids' names served not only as literacy tools but also as social tools. I have shown how text was often accompanied by talk, and argued that oral and written language should be seen as mutually constitutive rather than as separate modes of communication. In the next chapter, I will consider the importance of communicative flexibility for the kids' ability to generalize over material taught in the classroom.



## Chapter 4

### The limits of legitimate language

---

In the preceding chapters I have argued that the kids' successful construction and maintenance of interactional frames was vulnerable to the polysemy of oral and written signs. In this chapter I will add to this argument by considering interaction between the kids and their teachers, with particular emphasis on the institutionalized transmission of social values through classroom routines. I will consider the teachers' uses of language and literacy in what I refer to as *academic* and *social* priming events, and argue that discipline was integrated into many aspects of interaction between the kids and adults around them. In particular, the TRIBES programme was incorporated into a wide range of classroom routines through the teachers' use of terms like "appreciations" and "put downs". I will also argue that the routinized, and therefore often predictable, nature of these activities allowed the kids to playfully redefine what was going on.

In earlier chapters I described how some of the kids considered words and letters to be reified entities rather than detachable labels, despite the teachers' insistence that they should treat units of language as fluid and negotiable. In this chapter I will consider a possible source of this confusion for some of the kids. Whereas academic priming emphasized the detachability of words from things, social priming relied on the reified and non-negotiable aspects of word meaning. By sanctioning or rewarding the kids for using certain types of words, such as "bad words" or "magic words", the teachers implicitly encouraged the kids to view language as a direct reflection of reality rather than as a social tool. The kids' use of "bad words" should not be considered merely an effort to express their autonomy, but should also be considered an attempt to locate the limits of legitimate language.

#### "Im on grin"

The kids are seated in a circle on the rug in the classroom. It is Monday morning, and the kids have been taking turns talking about what they did during the weekend. All the other

kids have already shared, and Felipe is waiting for the teacher's permission to begin. Several kids are visibly restless. The teacher asks Nelson and Aricela to "stop moving around" and "listen to the person talking". She then looks at Felipe, and nods slightly to signal that he can begin. Felipe says "I saw Spiderman 3", and is followed by Nelson's enthusiastic outburst "I saw it too". The teacher again interferes, and speaks sternly as she tells the kids "Oh no, I'm moving names". She turns to the wall on her right, and reaches for the laminated piece of cardboard stuck to the wall. The cardboard is divided into five brightly coloured zones, ranging from green to red, with blue, yellow, and orange in between. Attached to the cardboard are twenty clothes pegs, each labelled with the name of one of the kids. Most of the clothes pegs are in the yellow or blue zones; only Nelson's and Aricela's names are in the orange zone. The teacher reaches for Nelson's name, and moves it from orange to red. Nelson folds his arms across his chest in a quiet show of disapproval. The teacher notices Aricela sticking her tongue out at Nelson, and moves her name, too, from orange to red. All the kids are now sitting quietly on the rug, and the teacher says "Remember, if you are on red when we go to recess, you will have to stay inside". She pauses for a few seconds as her eyes sweep across the rug, and then looks straight at Vanessa as she says "Good job practicing attentive listening". She then turns back to the clothes pegs and moves Vanessa's name from yellow to blue. Nelson raises his hand, and the teacher says "Yes Nelson, thank you for using a quiet hand". He asks "Are we gonna have our names?" The teacher replies "On the last day of school, you can take your names home with you". Nelson exclaims "Yes, we're gonna keep our names". Other kids join Nelson's excited response by saying "Yes", and Felipe adds "I hate red". The kids quickly calm down when they notice the teacher's hand searching up and down among the clothes pegs, apparently trying to decide which one to move. The teacher pulls her hand back without moving any names, and looks at the clock on the wall before she says "Okay, it's time for art". She asks the kids to line up by the door, and a few minutes later she leads them into the hallway on their way to the art room. As soon as the teacher is out of the room, Aricela leaves the line. She jogs over to the clothes pegs, and moves her name from red to yellow. She then looks at the other clothes pegs, and, after a few seconds, picks up Cora's clothes peg and moves it from yellow to red. She turns around, and runs back into the hallway to join the others.

During classroom instruction the kids were subject to a number of disciplinary practices that did not apply in the school yard or in the cafeteria. In addition to the explicit demands that the kids should "stop moving around" and "listen to the person talking", the teacher also applied a name-based system of clothes pegs to signal appropriate and inappropriate behavior. The teacher moved names towards green or red, one zone at a time, allowing the kids a chance to improve their behavior before reaching the red zone. In addition, the clothes pegs were reset to yellow every morning, to ensure that the kids would start each day with a new opportunity

to reach the green zone. Whereas the kids who were on red would sometimes have to stay in the classroom during recess, those who were on green at the end of the day were rewarded with a sticker. Like the blue tickets, described in the previous chapter, stickers were highly valued among the kids. Whereas blue tickets served as the official school currency, but could not be traded among the kids because they were individually named, the opposite was true of stickers; they did not have a functional value as currency in the official school world, but could be traded freely among the kids. The kids would often choose to trade their blue tickets for stickers in the school store, which they then exchanged for snacks or other stickers during lunch in the cafeteria.

The clothes pegs were primarily used to signal appropriate or inappropriate behavior, and seldom used to reward kids who performed well academically. Still, the teacher would move names regardless of whether the kids were engaged in academically oriented “direct instruction” activities or in socially oriented “community circle” activities based on the TRIBES principles. Thus, the omnipresence of the clothes pegs system served to integrate discipline seamlessly into almost all aspects of teacher-student interaction in the classroom, and illustrates how literacy was more than an academic subject in the official school world. In short, the teacher’s use of the kids’ names to discipline them exemplifies the ideological nature of literacy in use.

The kids were highly aware of the teacher’s power to reward and sanction them, and many seemed to have an ambiguous relationship to the clothes pegs system. On the one hand, as argued in a previous chapter, the kids tended to consider their names as representing their individual selves, and the clothes pegs served as materialized markers of identity. On the other hand, the kids had considerably less control over these clothes pegs than they usually did when they used their names in play or to communicate ownership. Perhaps because of this unresolved ambiguity, the teacher’s promise that the kids would be allowed to take their clothes pegs home with them on the last day of kindergarten was well received by the kids. They seemed to enjoy the idea of finally being able literally to take control of their names. Nelson, in particular, repeatedly told the other kids how he was looking forward to taking his “name” home with him, and on one occasion he told Sebastian “I’m gonna break it”.

When reading stories or engaging in discussions with the kids, the teacher would sometimes reach over and move a name without halting her speech. This routine mirrors Gumperz’ (1992) argument that communication is not necessarily turn-based, but takes place on several levels simultaneously. The teacher emphasized the efficiency of the clothes pegs system by referring to the fact that she could communicate her judgement of the kids’

behavior “without even saying anything”. In this sense, the moving of names exemplifies what Gumperz (1992:131) refers to as “contextualization cues”, which serve to communicate how a message is to be interpreted. As seen in the episode, the teacher did not even have to move any names in order for the system to work. Her hand searching up and down, while pretending to look for a particular name, was often sufficient to ensure that the kids would sit quietly. The system thus allowed metacommunicative signals to be conveyed explicitly to the kids without interrupting the ongoing activity. This kind of metacommunication is nicely summed up by Goffman (1971:107), who argues that “the complete cycle of crime, apprehension, trial, punishment, and return to society can run its course in two gestures and a glance”.

Unlike other socializing methods employed by the teacher, in which she would model appropriate talk and behavior by participating among the kids, the teacher’s name was not included among the clothes pegs. Instead, modeling was provided by the kids who exhibited appropriate behavior, whose names were often in the green zone. In the above episode the teacher explicitly commented on Vanessa’s appropriate behavior, providing the other kids with a justification for moving her name while simultaneously reminding them about her power to move other names as well. Not all the kids enjoyed being used to model behavior in this way. Nelson, for instance, seemed to consider it detrimental to his status in the peer group if his name approached the green zone. On one occasion, when an older student visited the classroom, Nelson told him “Look, I’m on red” while pointing to the clothes pegs with a proud expression on his face. This can be contrasted with Vanessa’s attitude; she once drew herself standing next to the clothes pegs with a sticker on her shirt, accompanied by the text “Im on grin”. Vanessa’s conformity made her an excellent choice whenever the teacher wanted to model appropriate behavior.

Karen Brison (1999:115) argues that “children everywhere try to assert their autonomy and competence by resisting adult control”. Attempts to resist adult control were particularly evident when the regular teacher was absent, and was replaced by substitute teachers who were often unfamiliar with the names of the kids and with the classroom routines. For instance, whereas the kindergarten teacher employed a rule that the kids were only allowed to go to the bathroom once during a classroom session, this rule was seldom practiced by substitute teachers. In effect, the kids would repeatedly ask if they could go to the bathroom, even if they had already gone several times. A permission to go to the bathroom is in a sense a permission to go “out of frame” in Goffman’s (1974:221) terms, a legitimate way of leaving, or at least temporarily stepping out of, the current frame and its accompanying rules.

As tangible expressions of adult control, the clothes pegs were ideal targets for the kids' expressions of autonomy. In the above episode, for instance, Aricela moved her own name as well as Cora's name once the teacher was out of sight. Few kids dared to move their names like this, not knowing whether the teacher would find out, or whether other kids would "tell on" them. When the kindergarten teacher was absent, however, the kids would engage in the subversive name moving practice with little apparent concern of being caught. Sometimes these activities took far from subtle forms, such as when a substitute teacher brought Sebastian to the office for "saying bad words"; when she returned to the classroom, she found the clothes pegs spread across the entire room. It was evident that some of the kids had taken the opportunity to throw them around while she was away, but she was unable to figure out who the culprits were. In the end she picked the clothes pegs up herself, while some of the kids could be heard giggling as they watched her from the rug.

A general argument that can be drawn from these examples is that the rules and routines of the official school world served not only to maintain order for the teachers to perform their job, but also provided the kids with ample opportunities to challenge adult authority. Another example was provided by the kids who would sometimes yawn excessively during classroom instruction. Unlike burping, which was sanctioned by the teachers, yawning was considered a legitimate action. Only the hidden exchange of smiles between the kids demonstrated that what was going on was not actual yawning, but a protest against what they referred to as "boring" activities. Such strategies, involving the bending rather than the breaking of rules, could successfully be maintained over time without being sanctioned, because the teacher would often choose to ignore what she considered minor violations of the rules. Contextualization cues were thus not monopolized by the teachers, but also applied by the kids to signal in-group solidarity with the other kids. Whereas the teacher argued for the efficiency of disciplining the kids without using any words, Goffman reminds us that people can disobey such disciplining attempts "even when no words are allowed them" (Goffman 1974:221).

## **"Appreciations"**

It is Monday afternoon, and the kids are seated in their individual squares on the rug. Their attention is directed at the teacher, who walks across the room to pick up "David", a toy moose, before returning to sit in front of them. The teacher says "Okay, get ready for

appreciations”. All the twenty kids get up from their seats, and rearrange into a circle formation. The teacher joins the circle by asking Aricela and Kara to “Scoot over please”, and then takes a seat between them. She waits for the kids to settle down, and then says “I appreciate Cho and Don for doing a good job during clean-up time”. Cho and Don reply in unison “You’re welcome”, and the teacher hands David to Aricela. All eyes are on Aricela as she shifts David between her hands. Without looking up, she points with one hand at Vanessa. The teacher tells her to “Use your words”, and Aricela says “Vanessa” in a low voice as she again points her finger in Vanessa’s direction. Nelson exclaims “We can’t hear you”, and the teacher adds “Full sentence please”. Aricela seems to have her full attention on David, now tossing the toy moose between her hands as if it were on fire. The teacher tells Aricela “You can pass if you want to”. Aricela quickly says “Pass” before handing David over to Cho who is sitting next to her. Cho looks David in the eyes and says “I appreciate Naeem and Don and Kyle, and Nelson, for playing with me outside”. The four boys reply “You’re welcome”, and the teacher tells Cho “Good. Remember next time to appreciate only two people”. Cho nods, and seems barely able to hide a smile as he passes David to Estrella. The teacher looks at Estrella, and says “Think of something nice someone did for you today. You probably did other things than play together”. Estrella says “I appreciate my mom”, and quickly hands the toy moose to Cora. The teacher tells her “It’s nice that you want to appreciate your mom, you should tell her when you get home. Please appreciate someone in the room”. Cora hands David back to Estrella. She accepts it, but immediately says “I wanna pass”. The teacher nods confirmingly, and Cora begins talking as soon as David is handed to her: “I appreciate Don for playing with me outside. And Vanessa, and Naeem, and Asim, and...” Cora is interrupted by the teacher who again says “Please appreciate only two people”. Cora smiles and nods, and hands David to Kyle while the four appreciated kids say “You’re welcome”.

“Appreciations” was one of many routine activities in the classroom inspired by the TRIBES programme. Near the end of each school day, the kids would take turns appreciating each other for “something nice” others had done to them during the day. Whereas the kids would usually be seated so that they all faced the teacher during classroom instruction, appreciations were performed in a “community circle”, with all the kids facing the centre of the circle so they could see each other while talking. This seating arrangement was applied during other routine activities as well, such as when the kids talked about what they had been doing over the weekend in the previous episode. The initiation of a community circle marked the transition from an academic to a social emphasis, and the seating arrangement was indicative of a literal shift of focus away from the teacher and onto the kids’ own contributions. The appreciations routine can be conceptualized as a “frame” in Bateson’s (2000) sense, marked off from other activities and following specific rules.

In addition to the seating arrangement, the teacher marked off, or “bracketed” (Goffman 1974:252), the appreciations activity using a combination of explicit commands and subtle cues. For instance, when the teacher said “Okay, get ready for appreciations”, and the kids instantly got up and rearranged into a circle, they confirmed that they were familiar with the rules of the appreciations frame. The teacher also made these rules explicit during the activity, as when she told Estrella to “appreciate someone in the room” rather than her mom. Estrella was told that the idea of appreciating her mom was “nice”, but inappropriate. In this way the teacher signalled a limit to the ongoing frame: only people present in the room should be appreciated. The teacher’s attempts to maintain the frame can also be seen in her recurrent demand that the kids “appreciate only two people”. One difficulty facing the teacher was her focus on maintaining the frame while simultaneously encouraging the kids to employ the social skills taught when outside the frame. One indication of her success at achieving this could be seen during Kara’s birthday party in the classroom, when Estrella raised her hand and said “I appreciate Kara’s mom for bringing cupcakes”. The episode directly mirrors the teacher’s intention that the kids should “Appreciate people for something nice they did”, and illustrates how Estrella had realized that this element of the TRIBES programme could be applied outside the specific appreciations frame.

It is commonly argued that socialization takes place mainly through “interactional routines” (Peters and Boggs 1986; see also Ochs 1988). The kindergarten teacher would introduce new elements into her teaching by anchoring them in familiar routines, allowing the kids the safety and predictability assumed necessary for them to focus on the one new element being introduced. Appreciations was only one of many teacher-initiated classroom routines that can be labelled using Corsaro and Molinari’s (2005) term “priming events”. Priming events are recognizable by caregivers’ primary emphasis on children’s imagined future, rather than on the immediate activity itself. Being in kindergarten is in itself a priming event, one major goal of which is to prepare the kids for their future status as first graders, and later as adults. Near the end of the school year the teachers increasingly referred to the fact that the kids would soon become “first graders”, and told them about what kinds of behavior would be expected and demanded from them in their new environment. When the kids misbehaved, the teachers would tell them “You are almost in first grade”, and ask them to “act like first graders”. These arguments seemed to have an overwhelming effect on the kids, some of whom took great pride in the fact that they were no longer “preschoolers”. In fact, the most common derogatives applied among the kids were “baby” and “cry-baby”, attesting to their concern with distancing themselves from their past status as fully dependent on adults.

Becoming first graders was considered an important transition by the kids, who often seemed to take offence when teachers commented that they did not seem “ready” for first grade.

Priming events can be divided into those primarily concerned with academic issues, and those concerned with social issues. The appreciations routine is an example of social priming, intended to teach the kids about proper ways to think about, and talk about, gratitude. In actual interaction it was often difficult to distinguish between academic and social priming, such as when the teacher told the kids they had “Eleven more days as kindergartners, and then you are first graders”, and then proceeded to count backwards from eleven to one. Besides referring to their upcoming transition to first grade, an example of social priming, she also included a counting task, which is an example of academic priming. Similarly, when teaching academic subjects the teacher would often refer to the TRIBES rules, thus integrating social priming into academic priming events. Even if these episodes can not easily be categorized either as academic or social, however, an analytic division allows us to distinguish between two main patterns of emphasis in the classroom interaction.

Goffman (1974:43-44) introduces the term “keying” to refer to how an activity can be “transformed into something patterned on this activity but seen by the participants to be something quite else”. The preceding chapters have presented a number of such “keyings” in the kids’ play, in which elements from the adult world in general, or the official school world in particular, were transformed into meaningful activities in the unofficial school world. Similarly, the teacher’s appreciations routine was a keying of everyday expressions of gratitude, using the same words, but taking place in a pretend setting where a layer of role play was added to the exchange of gratitude. Goffman (1974:45) claims that even when a keying alters an activity only slightly, “it utterly changes what it is a participant would say was going on”. Rather than assuming that the kids and the teacher’s construction of a frame called “appreciations” means that they emphasized the same elements during the activity, we should ask how their understandings might differ. For instance, many of the kids would ignore the teacher’s insistence that they “think of something nice someone did”, instead appreciating the kids they considered “friends” or whom they wanted to befriend. This was made obvious by the fact that the kids often appreciated the same people again and again, even if they had spent no time together during recess on those particular days. In addition, the kids would almost always say “for playing with me outside”, regardless of whether they had in fact spent time outside with the kids they appreciated.

Special attention should be given to the fact that several of the kids included more than two names even if they were explicitly told not to include more than two. As mentioned



above, many teacher-initiated classroom routines were justified with reference to their relevance for the kids' futures rather than their relevance for the present. This emphasis did not exist to the same degree among the kids, who seemed to be primarily concerned with the here-and-now aspect of these activities. The teacher's often repeated statement that the kids were only allowed to appreciate "two people" reflects the ideal held by the kids, that one should attempt to include as many names as possible during one's turn. The sanction imposed by the teacher when Cora attempted to mention a fifth name did not seem to annul the appreciations already given to the first four, as evidenced by their reply "You're welcome".

Whereas the teacher considered appreciations to be a social priming event, the kids saw it as an opportunity to create and maintain social bonds with the kids they liked. Characterized by their "recurrent and predictable" elements (Corsaro and Molinari 2005:28), priming events thus provided the kids not only with a safe environment for practicing social skills, but also allowed them to bend these rules to their advantage. In other words, the kids would play along with the rules of the frame, but emphasize different aspects than the teacher did. The kids' keying of the activity therefore exemplifies not only a keying, but a "rekeying" (Goffman 1974), because it is a transformation of an already transformed activity. First, the teacher provided a keying. Then, the activity was keyed by the kids to express something different, but still mostly following the frame conventions established by the teacher. In this way, the kids rekeyed the teacher's keyings, playfully manipulating frame expectations without deviating much from the routine. Again, the kids appeared to transfer values from the unofficial school worlds into the official world by bending rather than breaking the rules, relying on their familiarity with the classroom routines.

## **The value of words**

So far it has been argued that discipline was integrated into classroom routines, allowing for the transmission of social values, but also providing the kids with opportunities to refuse to conform to these values. The following section considers in more detail which values were actually being communicated, and the role of language and literacy in the socialization process.

Returning to the appreciations episode, we saw how the teacher frequently told the kids whether they had performed according to her expectations, thereby making explicit the rules of appropriate language and behavior. She used terms such as "Good job" or "Very good" to label appropriate responses. The kids were often reminded of the rules, such as when

Aricela pointed at Vanessa in the above episode, and the teacher told her to “Use your words”. Except for the teacher, only the person holding David was allowed to initiate talk during appreciations. The other kids were only allowed to talk when someone appreciated them, in which case they were expected to say “You’re welcome”. The kids were also expected to sit quietly with their legs crossed. These demands allowed the teacher to comment on other breaches of appropriateness than those pertaining directly to the appreciations routine, by reminding the kids to “Sit quietly with your hands in your lap” or telling them to “Keep your hands and feet to yourself”. The teacher would sometimes spend a large proportion of time during appreciations to rehearse these rules.

Ochs (1996:407) argues that the acquisition of language and social competence becomes intertwined “from the moment a human being enters society”. She suggests that any analysis of how children become competent social actors requires an understanding of the organization and use of specific “language practices” in a given community (Ochs 1996:408). The appreciations routine exemplifies one such language practice, its recurrent nature making it a suitable example of how values were transmitted from the official school world to the kids. It can be argued that language plays a dual role in this process. On the one hand, the teacher used language to socialize the kids, explicitly guiding them towards appropriate behavior, such as when she asked Aricela to speak in a “full sentence”. On the other hand, the kids themselves became users of language as a tool, incorporating elements from the appreciations routine into their language use outside the community circle, such as when Estrella appreciated Kara’s mom “for bringing cupcakes”. Following Ochs (1986), it can thus be argued that the kindergartners were simultaneously socialized *through* language and to *use* language in socially appropriate ways.

Language socialization in the classroom was often metalinguistic, in the sense that the teacher explicitly addressed the appropriateness of certain expressions over others. For instance, when Aricela refused to accept a cupcake during Kara’s birthday party by saying “I don’t want it”, the teacher instructed her to say “No thank you” instead. This supports the argument made by Ann Peters and Stephen Boggs (1986:80), that “in learning how to speak appropriately a child learns both language and social rules”. Adapting this language socialization to the individual kids, the teacher would not always comment on the appropriateness of the kids’ expressions. For instance, when Vanessa asked the teacher “Can I go to the bathroom?” the teacher allowed her to go, but added “Next time say ‘*May* I go to the bathroom’”. Vanessa nodded, and, in line with the teacher’s request, used the expression

“May I” when later asking for permission to go to the bathroom. When Nelson used the phrase “Can I go to the bathroom?” on a different occasion, however, he was not corrected.

In support of Ochs’ (1986:3) argument that “children acquire a world view as they acquire a language”, it can be claimed that the kids adopted particular ways of using grammar through classroom instruction. For instance, the teacher often used simplified grammar when writing sentences for the kids to read, such as “I go to park” rather than “I went to the park”, even if only the latter was grammatically appropriate. One reason for this was the teacher’s intention to encourage the kids to read without spending too much time on decoding unfamiliar words. The word “go” was one of the first words taught, and was applied to make it easier to read than the relatively difficult word “went”. Some kids also adopted this practice into their oral language in the official school world. For instance, when talking about what they did during the weekend, Kara said “I go to Santa Cruz”. Kara used the grammatically correct term “went” among peers outside the classroom, but seemed to consider “go” to be more appropriate in the official school world.

Gumperz (1986:61) argues that classroom interaction is often characterized by “formulaic phrases (...) both to announce activities or mark transitions from one to another and to sanction inappropriate behavior”. The kids soon learned how to read the teachers’ cues, as could be seen when they raised their hands eagerly in anticipation of an upcoming question. Even if the question had not yet been asked, the kids recognized the teacher’s prosody to be signalling an upcoming question. For instance, one teacher routinely asked “Can *anyone* tell me...” in a particular prosodic pattern. Similarly, she would ask “Does *anyone* know...” or “*Who* can tell me...”, in all cases leading several kids to raise their hands when only one or two words had been uttered. The teachers’ use of prosody to mark off particular frames was often made fun of by the kids, who would copy and further emphasize the teachers’ already exaggerated speech patterns when asked to repeat the teachers’ words during reading practices. On several occasions teachers told the kids to “please don’t exaggerate”.

The combination of explicit words and more subtle contextualization cues such as those provided by prosody seemed to equip the kids with guidelines for how many events should be perceived and responded to. For instance, when the teacher told Naeem and Nelson “You can play outside, okay?” when they were play fighting in the classroom, they responded by quietly sitting down on the rug. Neither of the two kids seemed to assume that the question warranted a response, being used to the teachers’ tendency to apply quasi-questions like this to cover up their commands as if they were real questions. Rather than signalling a question,

the term “okay” here served as a bracket, effectively ending any discussion before it had begun. The term “okay” was regularly used by the teacher to signal a new frame, as can be seen in several of the empirical episodes treated so far.

Similarly, when the teacher asked the kids to “vote” over which movie they wanted to see, she was clearly surprised when the result showed an overwhelming sixteen against four votes victory to the movie “Madagascar”, which the kids had watched in the classroom only a week before. She turned to the kids with a hesitant expression, and said “We just saw it. You guys really wanna watch Madagascar again?” The kids responded “Nooo” in unison. The mood had changed from enthusiasm over watching the movie, as evidenced by the many votes in its favour, to agreeing with the teacher that they should reconsider their decision. The teacher’s phrasing of a seemingly neutral question was not considered a real question by the kids, who knew that teachers sometimes presented their commands euphemistically as questions.

Whereas most of the kids were familiar with these conventions, Sebastian had a difficult time adapting during his first couple of weeks after joining the class. As has been argued by Gumperz (1992:132), misunderstandings often occur “when a listener does not react to a cue or is unaware of its function”. He argues further that “a large proportion of misunderstandings are traceable to variant perceptions and interpretations of seemingly trivial facial and gestural signs” (Gumperz 1992:141). Sebastian questioned some of the practices that others took for granted, and his requests for clarification were often perceived by the teachers as disturbances. For instance, when one teacher told the kids “Show me you’re ready”, expecting them to sit quietly with their hands in their laps, Sebastian instead asked “Ready for what?” The teacher ignored his question, waiting instead for him to follow her instructions like the others. After a few seconds, Sebastian noticed that the other kids were now sitting quietly, and sat down without a word.

Although Sebastian was in a special position because he was “the new kid”, the other kids, too, sometimes misread the teacher’s cues. When preparing for a trip to a local book store, where the kids were to pick one book each to take home with them, the teacher wanted the kids to reflect on what kinds of books they should look for. She told them how there were books for children with pictures and text, and how there were books for adults with just text. She then asked “Do you want books with no pictures in them?” and the kids enthusiastically replied “Yeah”. The teacher then had to rephrase her question in order for them to understand that she actually wanted them to pick books with pictures in them.

The kids' reliance on routines and predictability was sometimes challenged, as when adults around them were inconsistent in their uses of language and literacy. Different teachers applied somewhat different teaching strategies, requiring the kids to adapt to changing demands in the various classrooms. Whereas the kindergarten teacher was careful to spell the names of the kids correctly when using their names during instruction, other teachers showed little concern with the kids' insistence that their names should be spelled accurately. Some of the kids' names were misspelled on work sheets handed out to them, and when the kids were given library cards for use at the school library, several names were misspelled. One teacher used approximate spelling when writing the kids' names on a computer program. When Felipe got up and protested "That's not my name" upon noticing the peculiar spelling of his name, the teacher ignored his complaint, and asked him instead to sit down and continue his work. Several other kids soon joined the protest when they noticed that their names, too, were spelled incorrectly. The teacher again asked the kids to sit down, and addressed the whole class with the comment "I might not have your names spelled right, but don't worry about it". The kids returned to their seats, and no more protests could be heard.

Again, we see how the kids' names served as significant landmarks, as indicated by their protest when these names were misspelled. It was established in the previous chapter that the kids considered written representations of their names to be stable landmarks in the complex landscape known as written language. In Corsaro's words, "cultural routines serve as anchors that enable social actors to deal with ambiguities, the unexpected, and the problematic while remaining comfortably within the friendly confines of everyday life" (Corsaro 1997:19). Whereas the kindergarten teacher attempted to provide the kids with links between the spelling of their names and spelling conventions in general, it can be argued that her effort was contradicted by the practices applied by other teachers, who seemed less concerned with the kids' relationship to their names.

It appears that becoming literate involves learning not only how to *use* text in socially approved ways, but also how to *talk about* text in particular ways. The existence of several mutually incoherent practices in the official school world adds support to the claim by Cook-Gumperz (1986a), that literacy should be considered a socially constructed phenomenon. She argues that "any consideration of the uses of literacy must come back to a social judgement about functionality" (Cook-Gumperz 1986a:4). Requiring the kids to adapt to these changing practices, literacy for the kindergartners was not only a matter of learning to read and write, but a matter of adapting to constantly changing demands. The teachers' use of the kids' first names was thus a potentially alienating practice, causing further confusion among those kids

who already found it hard to understand the conventions underlying the spelling of their names in the first place.

### **“Magic words” and “bad words”**

Kyle is seated at a table in the classroom, deeply immersed in a “Dr. Seuss” book from the classroom library. Kara and Vanessa approach him, and Kara sits down next to Kyle. Vanessa sneaks up on Kyle from behind, and grabs the book before hiding it behind her back. Kyle protests, and says “Give it back”. Vanessa shakes her head, and smiles slyly as she tells him “You have to say the magic word” in a playful, almost singing voice. Kyle stays seated, but looks angry as he says “No, give it back”. Vanessa repeats her demand that he has to “Say the magic word”. Kyle looks increasingly uncomfortable as his eyes shift back and forth between Kara and Vanessa. Kara finally intervenes, and whispers something in Kyle’s ear. He immediately turns to Vanessa, his angry expression now turning into a soft smile. He says “Can I have my book *please*”. Vanessa turns to Kara and whispers “Stop helping” in a complaining voice, before turning back to Kyle and handing him the book.

So far it has been argued that teachers and other adults presented the kids with appropriate ways of using language and literacy, thus transmitting social values as well as academic and social skills. Even though these values were often communicated through subtle contextualization cues rather than explicit commands, language played a central role in most of the priming events in the classroom. This supports Ochs’ (1996) claim that language and socialization should be seen as closely intertwined. In this section a more detailed presentation will be given of how units of language were attributed a meaning far transcending their semantic meaning, through the categorization of words. For example, in the above episode where Vanessa demanded from Kyle that he said “the magic word”, the word “please” was attributed a meaning that reflected the significance adults applied to politeness terms.

The term “please” was one of two terms referred to as “magic words” by some of the kids, the other being “thank you”. Vanessa explained how her parents would sometimes ask her to “Say the magic word” whenever she “forgot” to use these words. “Please” was expected to be used when the kids asked for permission or assistance, and “thank you” was expected whenever they received gifts or assistance. The kids seldom used these conventional politeness terms in their interaction with each other. As in the above episode, when the kids

did apply politeness terms in their interaction with each other, it would often be in a playful manner. The fact that adults had to remind the kids to use these terms indicates that the kids often found them redundant; after all, politeness terms are seldom crucial for information to be transmitted. Although redundant in one sense, the terms were considered important by many caregivers and teachers, as they served to convey information on a metacommunicative level. For instance, politeness terms can serve to communicate relative social status, much in the same way as the use of titles such as “Mister” and “Miss” in Chapter 2. Kyle’s frustration until Kara whispered the appropriate response in his ear reflects how values from the official school world were not familiar to all the kids, but depended on their earlier experience with particular language practices.

Whereas the term “magic words” was only used among some of the caregivers, and seldom by the teachers, the term “bad words” was commonly applied by both teachers and caregivers. Unlike the category “magic words”, which only seemed to include the expressions “please” and “thank you”, the category “bad words” included a large number of words and expressions. Teaching assistants and visiting parents would respond to the kids’ use of bad words with expressions of aversion, often in the form of loud outbursts, to signal the inappropriateness of using such words. The two categories thus seem to constitute a dichotomy, as magic words were commented on when they were *left out*, whereas bad words were commented on when they were *included*.

The teachers generally refrained from responding with outbursts, and instead applied punishments such as keeping kids in the classroom during recess if they said bad words. In either case, adults expressed clear expectations towards the kids’ language use, and, in general, there was little doubt about which words were considered “bad”. However, some words were more ambiguous than others, and discussions sometimes arose in the classroom regarding whether a word should be considered “bad” or not. For instance, when Aricela raised her hand on the rug and said “I have to pee-pee”, Felipe responded by saying “Ooo, bad word”, consistent with how the kids usually responded to the use of bad words in the classroom. The teacher ignored Felipe’s comment, however, and allowed Aricela to go to the bathroom without commenting on her choice of words. Felipe’s protest “But she said a bad word” was to no avail. Again, it seems that the kids’ language practices from other arenas such as home and preschool caused them to respond differently to the language applied in the official school world. On another occasion, when the teacher introduced a new song to the kids with accompanying hand movements, Sebastian protested when the teacher held her middle finger up, and insisted “That’s the bad word finger”. The teacher explained how the

hand movement was “okay” as long as it was part of the song, and Sebastian seemed to accept this reframing of an otherwise inappropriate expression.

When discussions arose in the classroom about the appropriateness of certain words, the teacher usually had the last word, and would provide a definitive judgment as to whether a word should be considered “bad” or not. When no teacher was nearby to clarify, however, such as when the kids were in the cafeteria, the outcome of these discussions was often more unpredictable. For instance, when the kids were given carrots as part of their lunch one day, Sebastian said “I hate carrots”, followed by Felipe’s protest “Hate is a bad word”. Sebastian said “No it’s not, they’re just carrots”, and the two kids were unable to reach a conclusion. The confusion seemed to arise because the meaning of such words depended on the context of use. The kindergarten teacher tended to accept words such as “hate” as long as they were not directed at other people. If, however, an expression such as “hate” was directed at another kid, the teacher would consider it a “put down”, and sanction the perpetrator through a verbal reprimand and sometimes by moving the person’s name towards red. “Put downs” included not only bad words, but, in the teacher’s expression, “words that make people sad”. As such, “put downs” were to “appreciations” what “bad words” were to “magic words”. A similar distinction seems to lie behind Sebastian’s conception of “hate” as not being a bad word when applied to carrots.

Some kids, including Kara and Vanessa, seemed to avoid using bad words altogether, and employed euphemisms such as “the f-word” and “the s-word” rather than their counterparts “fuck” and “shit”. Other kids employed bad words in their interaction with other kids, but refrained from using such words when they thought adults could hear them. Sebastian and Naeem often exchanged bad words in the classroom wardrobe, taking turns proclaiming streams of forbidden utterances while laughing secretively and, now and again, looking around to see if the teacher was nearby. Corsaro (1985:259-260) argues that the fact that the use of bad words is considered “taboo” in the adult world accounts for the appeal these words have to children. His argument mirrors Goffman’s (1987:250) idea that sometimes “restrictions can create active desire”.

These secondary adjustments often made use of institutional structures for personal gains, again exemplifying how the bending of rules can be more efficient than the more direct breaking of these rules. For instance, Estrella would often “tell on” other kids if they broke the classroom rules. The teacher had told the kids to “use your words” if they needed to solve conflicts, and specifically suggested that they could say “I feel sad” to try to evoke empathy from the perpetrator. Estrella would use this routine to get the teacher’s attention, as when she



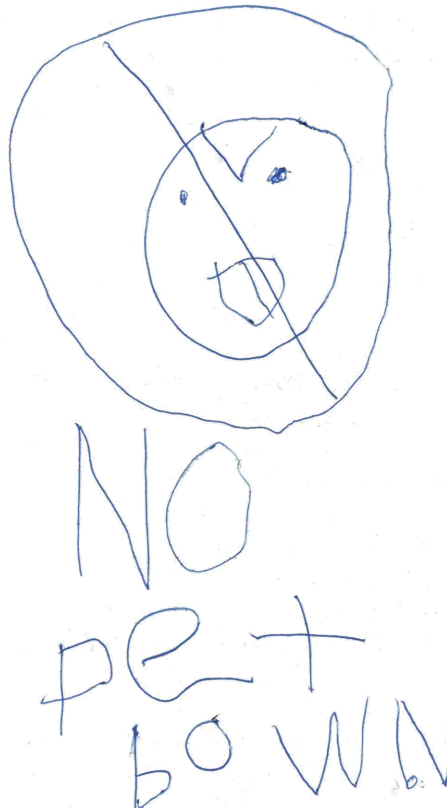


Figure 7: Felipe's interpretation of the "No put downs" sign in the classroom, referring to the TRIBES rule against using words to hurt other people's feelings.

---

and Felipe were having an argument, and Estrella announced "Stop saying shut up, I feel sad when you do that". The teacher interfered to have a serious talk with Felipe about his language use. Estrella's use of the expression "shut up" was left unsanctioned, as she was simply commenting on Felipe's use of the inappropriate expression. Estrella sometimes applied similar tactics when no rule had been broken, as when the teacher walked by Estrella and Naeem and she said "I feel sad when you laugh Naeem". The teacher stopped, and Naeem looked puzzled as his eyes shifted between Estrella and the teacher before he said "I didn't laugh". Estrella replied "Yes you did", and they both turned and looked at the teacher. The teacher walked away without a word, well aware that Estrella applied such strategies in her attempts to frame other kids. Estrella's use of the term "I feel sad" exemplifies how language is not merely referential, but can be used performatively as a social tool.

Bateson (2000:164) argues that "when people learn something, they also learn about the *context* in which they learn". In other words, what Bateson (2000:274) refers to as "deutero-learning", or learning to learn, involves an implicit or explicit generalization from

particular events to a more abstract level. An example of this generalization was provided earlier, when Estrella applied the appreciations routine to an occurrence outside the community circle. Considering the use of bad words above, it can be argued that the kids did not only learn which words were considered “bad”, but learned that there is such a thing as a “bad word”. The kids’ use of bad words should not only be considered acts of defiance against adult values, but an attempt to figure out how language use and social norms are related to each other. The kids’ experimental use of bad words in the official and unofficial school worlds thus serve as a prism through which the kids’ attempts to locate the limits of legitimate language can be analyzed.

A paradox in the use of language in the official school world can now be pinpointed, between the practices referred to earlier as academic and social priming. Whereas teachers on the one hand explicitly encouraged the kids to consider units of language to be flexible and manipulable labels, fully detachable from the objects or people they refer to, they also marked off certain words as being intrinsically “bad”, thus challenging the notion that words are mere labels. In other words, academic and social priming relied on two opposing perspectives on the functions of language. In conclusion, the kids’ use of bad words should not be seen only as expressions of solidarity with each other and refusal to conform to adult values, but as constantly ongoing attempts to locate the exact limits between appropriate and inappropriate language, and to make sense of the often ambiguous relationship between words and their referents.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter I have taken a step from the unofficial to the official school world, in order to further contextualize the uses of language and literacy among the kids. I have shown how the teachers’ different practices required the kids to adapt to changing demands. I have also shown how discipline was integrated into both social and academic priming events, allowing the teachers to convey particular social values through repeated language practices. I have argued that the routinized nature of many such events allowed the kids to bend the classroom rules in order to emphasize other values than those promoted by their teachers.

I have argued that a distinction between social and academic priming allows us to see a paradox in the teachers’ presentation of language in the official school world. On the one hand, the kids were asked to consider words to be detachable units that could be manipulated in academic practices such as reading and writing. On the other hand, the kids

were told that some words are essentially “bad”, thus promoting a view of language as reified and unsuitable for use or manipulation. Rather than considering the kids’ use of bad words only as secondary adjustments, I have argued that their use of inappropriate language was part of their ongoing attempts to locate the limits of legitimate language.

## Chapter 5

### Summary and suggestions

---

In this thesis I have investigated the role of language awareness in early literacy, and argued that the skills acquired when becoming literate can provide resources for manipulating social as well as textual relations. Whereas earlier research has focused primarily on the acquisition of literacy skills in classroom settings, my intention has been to focus on the kindergartners' uses of literacy in unofficial school worlds, when undirected by adults. In particular, I have wanted to explore how the kindergartners' communicative patterns were affected by their uses of literacy. The explicit content of language has been considered only one aspect of communication, and has been supplemented with a consideration of how metacommunicative signals served to frame interaction. In particular, the kids' own names were found to be significant symbolic markers to all the kindergartners, although in very different ways.

I have described how the kids' names provided them with familiar and stable landmarks with which to explore both oral and written language. The capacity of names to facilitate communication was, however, countered by the equally powerful capacity of names to obstruct communication. Presenting the kids' personal names as examples of how language is often polysemic, or ambiguous, I have argued that, even if the words they used did not have a singular meaning, they were often treated as if they did. I have argued that there was a mismatch between two dominant perspectives on language among the kindergartners. Whereas some of the kids primarily used names as markers of identity, others challenged this stability by manipulating names in what I have referred to as *name joking*; the playful manipulation of phonemes or letters for humorous effect. Some kids routinely took advantage of the fact that not everyone understood the function of context markers such as play cues. The assumed fixity of names seemed to make them particularly suitable for this kind of joking, and a tension could often be found between the kids who considered names to be attached to individuals, and those who considered names to be detached or detachable from individuals. As with social structures in general, language structures can be considered resources that can be manipulated for social effects.

I have argued that play is best approached as a particular attitude rather than a type of activity, in order to make sense of the fact that participants may have different conceptions regarding whether what they are doing is, in fact, play. This perspective made it possible to see how play, far from being restricted to the school yard, was a significant aspect of social interaction in both the classroom and the cafeteria. I have argued that metalinguistic awareness, understood as the ability to attend to elements of language as objects, was a prerequisite for the kind of playfulness illustrated by name joking. Rather than a difference in individual skills, however, I have argued that the kids' different perspectives on phenomena such as name joking was the product of a difference in communicative flexibility. As such, the kids who were able to switch between considering names to be attached and to be detached from people had a distinct advantage both in conversation and play among the kindergartners. Although teachers encouraged the kids to consider language to be a fluid and flexible tool, they also treated language as a direct reflection of reality by responding with sanctions when the kids used inappropriate language such as what was referred to as "bad words".

Concerning future research into children's literacy, I have a few recommendations. First, it seems clear that young children's acquisition of literacy can best be approached through a dual focus on play and academic achievement. This is so because the play attitude is widespread among children, regardless of whether they are engaged in classroom activities or leisure activities. Second, a comparison of language and literacy practices at home and at school would provide insight into the sources of different literacy schemas, making it possible to draw conclusions about the causes as well as the consequences of particular literacy practices. The dual focus on skills and social practice, which has been central to my approach in the preceding chapters, seems well suited to such a purpose.

Much research on children's early literacy has been carried out on the assumption that becoming literate can be conceptualized as the acquisition of a set of measurable cognitive skills. I have argued that literacy should be seen not merely as a set of cognitive skills, but as a social tool. It is my belief that the intent of the NCLB to measure individual skills leaves out an important aspect of early literacy. The argument made in Chapter 3, that the kids' own names often served as landmarks in their further exploration of text, undermines the idea that quantitative studies and standardized tests can map children's written language competence adequately. I believe that ethnographic studies of the uses of literacy provide us with a key to understand children's conceptions of the functions of literacy, and offers a necessary supplement to the skills-based focus on literacy forms.

## References

---

Alford, Richard D.

1988. *Naming and Identity: A Cross-Cultural Study of Personal Naming Practices*. New Haven, Connecticut: HRAF Press.

Baquedano-Lopez, Patricia, Jorge L. Solís, and Shlomy Kattan

2005. "Adaption: The Language of Classroom Learning". *Linguistics and Education*, 16:1-26.

Basso, Keith H.

1989. "The Ethnography of Writing". In Bauman, Richard and Joel Sherzer (eds.). *Explorations in the Ethnography of Speaking*, pp. 425-432. Cambridge University Press.

Bateson, Gregory

1956. "The Message 'This Is Play'". In Schaffner, Bertram (ed.). *Group Processes*, pp. 145-242. New Jersey: Josiah Macy, Jr. Foundation.

1968 [Orig. 1951]. "Conventions of Communication: Where Validity Depends Upon Belief". In Ruesch, Jurgen and Gregory Bateson. *Communication. The Social Matrix of Psychiatry*, pp. 212-227. New York: Norton & Company.

2000 [Orig. 1972]. *Steps to an Ecology of Mind: Collected Essays in Anthropology, Psychiatry, Evolution, and Epistemology*. San Francisco: Chandler Pub. Co.

Bloch, Maurice

1998. *How We Think They Think. Anthropological Approaches to Cognition, Memory, and Literacy*. Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press.

2008. "Truth and Sight: Generalizing Without Universalizing". *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 14(1):22-32.
- Bloodgood, Janet W.  
1999. "What's In a Name? Children's Name Writing and Literacy Acquisition". *Reading Research Quarterly*, 34(3):342-367.
- Bluebond-Langner, Myra and Jill E. Korbin  
2007. "Challenges and Opportunities in the Anthropology of Childhoods: An Introduction to 'Children, Childhoods, and Childhood Studies'". *American Anthropologist*, 109(2):241-246.
- Bodenhorn, Barbara and Gabriele Vom Bruck  
2006. "'Entangled in Histories': An Introduction to the Anthropology of Names and Naming". In Bodenhorn, Barbara and Gabriele Vom Bruck (eds.). *The Anthropology of Names and Naming*, pp. 1-30. Cambridge University Press.
- Brison, Karen J.  
1999. "Hierarchy in the World of Fijian Children". *Ethnology*, 3(2):107-119.
- Cazden, Courtney B.  
1974. "Play and Metalinguistic Awareness: One Dimension of Language Experience". *The Urban Review*, 7(1):28-39.
- Clay, Marie M.  
1991. *Becoming Literate: The Construction of Inner Control*. Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann.
- Clyde, Jean Anne, Carol Miller, Stacy Sauer, Karen Liebert, Susan Parker, and Sarah Runyon  
2006. "Teachers and Children Inquire into Reggio Emilia". *Language Arts*, 83(3):215-226.
- Collins, James and Richard Blot  
2003. *Literacy and Literacies. Text, Power, and Identity*. Cambridge University Press.

Cook-Gumperz, Jenny

1986a. "Introduction: The Social Construction of Literacy". In Cook-Gumperz, Jenny (ed.). *The Social Construction of Literacy*, pp. 1-18. Cambridge University Press.

1986b. "Literacy and Schooling: An Unchanging Equation?" In Cook-Gumperz, Jenny (ed.). *The Social Construction of Literacy*, 19-49. Cambridge University Press.

Cook-Gumperz, Jenny and William A. Corsaro

1986. "Introduction". In Cook-Gumperz, Jenny, William A. Corsaro, and Jürgen Streeck (eds.). *Children's Worlds and Children's Language*, pp. 1-11. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.

Corsaro, William A.

1985. *Friendship and Peer Culture in the Early Years*. New Jersey: Ablex.

1992. "Interpretive Reproduction in Children's Peer Cultures". *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 55(2):160-177.

1997. *The Sociology of Childhood*. Thousand Oaks, California: Pine Forge Press.

Corsaro, William A. and Luisa Molinari

2005. *I Compagni: Understanding Children's Transition from Preschool to Elementary School*. New York: Teacher College Press.

Corsaro, William A. and Elizabeth Nelson

2003. "Children's Collective Activities and Peer Culture in Early Literacy in American and Italian Preschools". *Sociology of Education*, 76(3):209-227.

Davilla, Donna E. and Susan M. Koenig

1998. "Bringing the Reggio Concept to American Educators". *Art Education*, 51(4):18-24.



Denzin, Norman K.

1982. "The Paradoxes of Play". In Loy, John W. (ed.). *The Paradoxes of Play*, pp. 13-24. New York: Leisure Press.

Dyson, Anne Haas

1993. *Social Worlds of Children Learning to Write in an Urban Primary School*. New York: Teachers College.

1999. "Transforming Transfer: Unruly Children, Contrary Texts, and the Persistence of the Pedagogical Order". *Review of Research in Education*, 24:141-171.

2001. "Writing and Children's Symbolic Repertoires: Development Unhinged". In Neuman, Susan B. And David K. Dickinson (eds.). *Handbook of Early Literacy Research*, pp. 126-141. New York: The Guilford Press.

2008. "Staying in the (Curricular) Lines: Practice Constraints and Possibilities in Childhood Writing". *Written Communication*, 25(1):119-159.

Emerson, Robert M., Rachel I. Fretz, and Linda L. Shaw

1995. *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*. University of Chicago Press.

Ferreiro, Emilia

1986. "The Interplay Between Information and Assimilation in Beginning Literacy". In Teale, William H. and Elizabeth Sulzby (eds.). *Emergent Literacy: Writing and Reading*, pp. 15-49. Westport, CT: Ablex Publishing.

Ferreiro, Emilia and Ana Teberosky

1982. *Literacy Before Schooling*. Exeter, N.H.: Heinemann Educational Books.

Frake, Charles O.

1980. *Language and Cultural Description*. Stanford University Press.

## References

---

Garrett, Paul B. and Patricia Baquedano-López

2002. "Language Socialization: Reproduction and Continuity, Transformation and Change". *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 31:339-361.

Glenn, Phillip

2003. *Laughter in Interaction*. Cambridge University Press.

Goffman, Erving

1971. *Relations in Public: Microstudies of the Social Order*. New York: Basic Books.

1974. *Frame Analysis*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

1987 [Orig. 1961]. *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates*. London: Penguin Books.

Goody, Jack

1986. *The Logic of Writing and the Organization of Society*. Cambridge University Press.

1987. *The Interface Between the Written and the Oral*. Cambridge University Press.

1994 [Orig. 1977]. *The Domestication of the Savage Mind*. Cambridge University Press.

Goody, Jack and Ian P. Watt

1963. "The Consequences of Literacy". *Contemporary Studies in Society and History*, 5:304-345.

Graff, Harvey J.

1979. *The Literacy Myth: Literacy and Social Structure in the Nineteenth-Century City*. New York: Academic Press.

Gulløv, Eva and Susanne Højlund

2003. *Feltarbejde blandt børn. Metodologi og etik i etnografisk børneforskning*. København: Gyldendal.

Gumperz, John J.

1986. "Interactional Sociolinguistics in the Study of Schooling". In Cook-Gumperz, Jenny (ed.). *The Social Construction of Literacy*, pp. 45-68. Cambridge University Press.

1992 [Orig. 1982]. *Discourse Strategies*. Cambridge University Press.

Gumperz, John J. and Stephen C. Levinson

1996. "Introduction: Linguistic Relativity Re-Examined". In Gumperz, John J. and Stephen C. Levinson (eds.). *Rethinking Linguistic Relativity*, pp. 1-18. Cambridge University Press.

Harris, Judith Rich

1998. *The Nurture Assumption: Why Children Turn Out the Way They Do*. London: Bloomsbury.

Heath, Shirley Brice

1983. *Ways With Words: Language, Life, and Work in Communities and Classrooms*. Cambridge University Press.

Hicks, Deborah

1996. "Introduction". In Hicks, Deborah (ed.). *Discourse, Learning, and Schooling*, pp. 1-25. Cambridge University Press.

Humphrey, Caroline

2006. "On Being Named and Not Named: Authority, Persons, and Their Names in Mongolia". In Bodenhorn, Barbara and Gabriele Vom Bruck (eds.). *The Anthropology of Names and Naming*, pp. 158-176. Cambridge University Press.

Iteanu, Andre

2000. "Processing of Naming, Cambridge, 14-15 September 1999". *Anthropology Today*, 16(3):24-25.

Jenkins, Richard

2004. *Social Identity*. London & New York: Routledge.

Jenks, Chris

1992. "Introduction: Constituting the Child". In Jenks, Chris (ed.). *The Sociology of Childhood. Essential Readings*, pp. 9-24. Brookfield Vt: Gregg Revivals.

Karen, David

2005. "No Child Left Behind? Sociology Ignored!" *Sociology of Education*, 78(2):165-169.

Kittay, Jeffrey

1991. "Thinking through Literacies". In Olson, David R. and Nancy Torrance (eds.). *Literacy and Orality*, pp. 165-176. Cambridge University Press.

Ochs, Elinor

1986. "Introduction". In Schieffelin, Bambi B. and Elinor Ochs (eds.). 1986. *Language Socialization Across Cultures*, pp. 1-13. Cambridge University Press.

1988. *Culture and Language Development. Language Acquisition and Language Socialization in a Samoan Village*. Cambridge University Press.

1996. "Linguistic Resources for Socializing Humanity". In Gumperz, John J. and Stephen C. Levinson (eds.). *Rethinking Linguistic Relativity*, pp. 407-437. Cambridge University Press.

Olson, David R.

1985. "Introduction". In Olson, David R., Nancy Torrance, and Angela Hildyard (eds.). *Literacy, Language, and Learning. The Nature and Consequences of Reading and Writing*, pp. 1-15. Cambridge University Press.

1991. "Literacy as Metalinguistic Activity". In Olson, David R. and Nancy Torrance (eds.). *Literacy and Orality*, pp. 251-270. Cambridge University Press.

1994. *The World On Paper. The Conceptual and Cognitive Implications of Writing and Reading*. Cambridge University Press.

Opie, Iona and Peter Opie

1992. "The Lore and Language of School Children". In Jenks, Chris (ed.). *The Sociology of Childhood. Essential Readings*, pp. 173-180. Brookfield Vt: Gregg Revivals.

Peccei, Jean S.

2006. *Child Language. A Resource Book for Students*. New York: Routledge.

Peters, Ann M. and Stephen T. Boggs

1986. "Interactional Routines as Cultural Influences Upon Language Acquisition". In Schieffelin, Bambi B. and Elinor Ochs (eds.). 1986. *Language Socialization Across Cultures*, pp. 80-96. Cambridge University Press.

Prevignano, Carlo L. and Aldo di Luzio

2003. "A Discussion with John J. Gumperz". In Eerdmans, Susan L., Carlo L. Prevignano, and Paul J. Thibault (eds.). *Language and Interaction. Discussions with John J. Gumperz*, pp. 7-29. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing.

Purcell-Gates, Victoria, Erik Jacobsen, and Sophie Degener

2004. *Print Literacy Development. Uniting Cognitive and Social Practice Theories*. Harvard University Press.

Sadovnik, Alan

2006. "Toward a Sociology of Educational Change. An Application of Bernstein to the US 'No Child Left Behind' Act". In Moore, Rob, Madeleine Arnot, John Beck, and Harry Daniels (eds.). *Knowledge, Power and Educational Reform. Applying the Sociology of Basil Bernstein*, 196-210. New York: Routledge.

Schwartzman, Helen B.

1978. *Transformations. The Anthropology of Children's Play*. New York: Plenum Press.

Schwartzman, John

1982. "Playing Around with Words: Humor and Post-Modern Fiction". In Loy, John (ed.). *The Paradoxes of Play*, pp. 50-56. New York: Leisure Press.

Scribner, Sylvia and Michael Cole

1981. *The Psychology of Literacy*. Harvard University Press.

Sloan, Kris

2007. "High-Stakes Accountability, Minority Youth, and Ethnography: Assessing the Multiple Effects". *Anthropology & Education Quarterly* 38(1):24-41.

Street, Brian V.

1995. *Social Literacies: Critical Approaches to Literacy in Development, Ethnography and Education*. Essex: Pearson Education Limited.

Sulzby, Elizabeth

1986. "Writing and Reading: Signs of Oral and Written Language Organization in the Young Child". In Teale, William H. and Elizabeth Sulzby (eds.). *Emergent Literacy: Writing and Reading*, pp. 50-89. Westport, CT: Ablex Publishing.

Tannen, Deborah

1993. "What's In a Frame? Surface Evidence for Underlying Expectations". In Tannen, Deborah (ed.). 1993. *Framing in Discourse*, pp. 14-56. Oxford University Press.

Tannen, Deborah and Cynthia Wallat

1993. "Interactive Frames and Knowledge Schemas in Interaction: Examples from a Medical Examination/Interview". In Tannen, Deborah (ed.). 1993. *Framing in Discourse*, pp. 57-76. Oxford University Press.

Trimble, Stephen

1994. "The Scripture of Maps, the Names of Trees: A Child's Landscape". In Nabhan Gary Paul and Stephen Trimble (eds.). *The Geography of Childhood. Why Children Need Wild Places*, pp. 17-31. Boston: Beacon Press.

Valli, Linda and Marilyn Chambliss

2007. "Creating Classroom Cultures: One Teacher, Two Lessons, and a High-Stakes Test". *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, 38(1):57-75.

Whitehurst, Grover J. and Christopher J. Lonigan

2001. "Emergent Literacy: Development from Prereaders to Readers". In Neuman, Susan B. And David K. Dickinson (eds.). *Handbook of Early Literacy Research*, pp. 11-29. New York: The Guilford Press.

Yaden, David B.

1986. "Reading Research in Metalinguistic Awareness: A Classification of Findings According to Focus and Methodology". In Yaden, David B. and Shane Templeton (eds.). *Metalinguistic Awareness and Beginning Literacy*, pp. 41-62. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.