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Relating Word to World: Indexicality During Literacy Events

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Abstract
As methodological pendulums swing wildly and politicized education reform climates grow hot then cold, as teachers change their books and their seating arrangements, as laptops are issued, as blackboards change to whiteboards, and even as the complexion and language backgrounds of students change dramatically, a certain feature of classrooms may change very little. It is likely that certain students, those who have always struggled through school, will continue to do so. From one perspective, this persistent inequity in the classroom is rarely affected by policy changes because inequity is handed down from societal injustice at large. While certain critical theoretical perspectives on education (e.g., Freire, 1970; Giroux, 1992; Hooks, 1994) investigate, theorize, and practice education by first analyzing injustices outside the classroom, a linguistic anthropological perspective combines this awareness of larger societal patterns with a close look at how the particularities of interactions shape who gets to learn inside a classroom. Linguistic anthropology provides analytic tools to investigate and critique interactions inside, around, and relevant to these classrooms. The promise linguistic anthropology holds for education, then, is in the analytical insights it provides into the relationship between larger sociocultural patterns and the (re)production of inequity, on the level of person-to-person interaction, inside the classroom (Philips, 1993).

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Relating Word to World

Indexicality During Literacy Events

Betsy Rymes

Can learning take place if in fact it silences the voices of the people it is supposed to teach? . . . The answer is: Yes. People learn that they don't count.

Henry Giroux, 1992, p. 15

As methodological pendulums swing wildly and politicized education reform climates grow hot then cold, as teachers change their books and their seating arrangements, as laptops are issued, as blackboards change to whiteboards, and even as the complexion and language backgrounds of students change dramatically, a certain feature of classrooms may change very little. It is likely that certain students, those who have always struggled through school, will continue to do so. From one perspective, this persistent inequity in the classroom is rarely affected by policy changes because inequity is handed down from societal injustice at large. While certain critical theoretical perspectives on education (e.g., Freire, 1970; Giroux, 1992; Hooks, 1994) investigate, theorize, and practice education by first analyzing injustices outside the classroom, a linguistic anthropological perspective combines this awareness of larger societal patterns with a close look at how the
particularities of interactions shape who gets to learn inside a classroom. Linguistic anthropology provides analytic tools to investigate and critique interactions inside, around, and relevant to these classrooms. The promise linguistic anthropology holds for education, then, is in the analytical insights it provides into the relationship between larger sociocultural patterns and the (re)production of inequity, on the level of person-to-person interaction, inside the classroom (Philips, 1993).

This link between macro-level power inequities and micro-level interactional positioning is not new (cf., Duranti & Ochs, 1988; Foster, 1995; Heath, 1983; Philips, 1993), and lately it has taken the form of work on the social construction of identity through classroom discourse and narrative (Gee, 2001; Rymes & Pash, 2001; Wortham, 2001). Despite this growing body of work, however, there is some resistance to micro-level analysis of discourse. One reason for this may be that taking the words of one teacher and a few students and putting them under the analytical microscope could be construed as "epistemic violence" (Bransen & Miller, 2000; Spivak, 1993) or ethically dubious (DeStigter, 2001). Close analysis of a transcript can be viewed as reading into what people are saying, appropriating their words for our own agendas. We don't want to ascribe a certain identity to a person, or suppose they have certain goals or intentions based only on their words. But this is what people (including teachers and students) do every day in interaction. Every day, in school, teachers and students interpret each other's words, read into them, and act according to their own presuppositions and expectations. The everydayness of this activity is why it is so powerful, and why close micro-analysis is so important—not to reproduce the assumptions and the "reading into" that goes on everyday, but to uncover this process and explore how this "reading into" reproduces unequal power relations that exist in society more generally.

This chapter focuses on this process. Unlike earlier work on communicative competence and its relevance to classroom discourse, this chapter does not describe an ethnography of "ways of speaking" (Hymes, 1972) that could be generalized to all the children in this reading group, or to a certain socioeconomic, linguistic, or ethnic demographic. It describes the particularities of a few interactions, and the implications of those processes for learning. For example, choosing between the words "happy" and "gay," or deciding to use the word "dude" in a certain way, might make or break someone's apparent competence during a classroom interaction. And, by incorporating students' use of those words into a reading lesson, a teacher constructs a particular stance toward learning and social issues. These are incidental, interactionally contingent micro cues. But one reason we—and in
this we I include myself as a researcher as well as the teacher and students participating in the interaction—care about and attend to these cues is that they are linked to educational outcomes and, in turn, to power relations in society at large.

More specifically, by examining literacy events in two very different classroom settings, I argue that certain micro interactional phenomena construct a limiting portrait of what literacy can or should be. In one of these literacy contexts, the teacher follows a carefully scripted phonics program, and in the other the teacher freely selects children's literature trade books as well as themes and activities to accompany these books. Both of these teachers were seeking the best practices to help struggling readers—those who were already falling far behind their peers. Of course, neither of these teachers intended to reproduce the failure of linguistic and ethnic minorities, and they drew on varied methodologies to avoid doing so. However, students' experience of the reading process is not necessarily related to the methodology teachers intend to follow. Nor are children's experiences with reading success or failure necessarily related to teachers' overarching goal to provide equal educational access to language minority students. Instead, it may be that children's success as readers is crucially affected by the stance these teachers take in interactions as students use words of a text (like "gay" or "dude") to index worlds outside that text. The analyses that follow show this process in action, describing how micro-level linguistic practice structures these students' experiences of reading. As the chapter shows, linguistic anthropology can provide the first step to reforming the kinds of interactions that go on in classrooms and the way literacy is constructed through those interactions.

BACKGROUND: SETTING AND PARTICIPANTS

I examine these issues through classroom interactions that involve Rene (all names here are pseudonyms), a second language learner and native of Costa Rica, and his changing classroom peers. For two years, I made weekly trips to Rene's elementary school in Northeast Georgia to observe, tutor, videotape, and, in the process, try to understand Rene's struggle through classroom practices designed to facilitate his progress as a reader.

When the study began, in 1998, Rene was repeating second grade because of reading difficulties. During this year his teacher, on her own initiative, decided to try a literature-based reading approach with Rene and several other struggling readers in the classroom. (All of the other struggling readers were native English speakers.) During these reading sessions, Rene's teacher read books aloud to children and encouraged
them to enter into the story by describing pictures, talking about their own experiences, and drawing and writing stories related to the topics in that week’s book. During the second year of the study (1999-2000), Rene, despite limited progress in his reading, was promoted to third grade, and the school created an English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) pullout program for the increasing numbers of second language learners. During the second year, in the ESOL pullout group, reading lessons consisted primarily of phonics instruction. This was accomplished by playing a carefully sequenced series of card games.

On the surface, there appears to have been a drastic change in curriculum between the first and second year of my study. The school developed an ESOL program (as mandated by the state and federal government); reading instruction switched from literature-based whole-language activities to phonics card games and rule recitation. Rene’s reading group transformed from a single-grade group of native English speakers to a multi-grade group of second language learning peers. However, despite the contrast in methodological approaches practiced by these reading teachers, my research suggests that there were some profound similarities in how reading interactions were accomplished during these two years. These similarities become clear on a closer look at how the world outside the text and the practice of reading itself are indexed in these reading groups.

The analysis that follows analyzes the similarities between the two classrooms and the discursive mechanisms that facilitate these similarities. First, I outline the linguistic anthropological concept of indexicality and its relationship to literacy events.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND: INDEXICALITY AND LITERACY

What is the role of indexicality in literacy? I argue that literacy events are constructed, in part, through patterns of indexical practice. Cues within interaction suggest both how a text is to be understood and how, in general, the practice of reading is legitimately accomplished. To build this argument I briefly outline the role of indexicality in literacy.

Indexicality

Generally speaking, to say that utterances are indexical is to say that their meaning, rather than being arbitrary or purely symbolic, is tied to context. In some cases, the context-bound nature of reference is obvious. For example, certain words (like the pronouns you and me, or the demonstratives this and that) are obviously indexical because the refer-
ential meaning of you and me, or this and that depends primarily on the situation in which I use such words. While pronouns like you and demonstratives like that are most clearly indexical as individual words, all language is indexical to a degree. Linguistic forms do carry some decontextualizable symbolic content, but there is also an element of word-meaning that is construed through context. Gee (1999) gives the example of coffee. At first glance, this word seems very different from a word like you or this. Its meaning doesn’t seem to depend on the context of utterance—that is, its meaning appears to be more symbolic. But Gee uses the two utterances, “The coffee spilled, get a broom” and “the coffee spilled, get a mop,” to illustrate how the meaning of the word coffee changes according to the words that surround it. This is because the words around the word coffee (like broom or mop) act as indexical cues that tell us what aspects of context are relevant to our understanding of that word—the words broom and mop presuppose different kinds of coffee spills.

Indexical cues can also create new contexts. For example, imagine that someone sees the coffee spill and, instead of demanding a mop or a broom, says, in a joking voice, “The coffee spilled, Mrs. Olson!” For those familiar with old Folger’s coffee commercials, Mrs. Olson cues a new context for coffee—the homey kitchen in which she serves up a rich, mountain-grown brew. In this utterance, Mrs. Olson functions as an entailing (or “creative”) indexical (Silverstein, 1976), creating a new relevant context for interpreting the word coffee. In addition, the use of Mrs. Olson as a term of address entails or creates a new addressee identity. Suddenly, the person who spilled the coffee is constructed as a matronly Swedish homemaker. The use of Mrs. Olson might also simultaneously create an identity for the speaker as someone old enough to have been around for those Mrs. Olson commercials, someone who watched enough TV to have some lasting familiarity with her, and someone who bothers remembering such characters. The use of Mrs. Olson and its co-occurrence with a light-hearted tone of voice might also transform the speech situation from one that foregrounds the annoyance of spilled coffee to one that foregrounds a casual joking relationship. All these possibilities arise from the potentialities of creative indexing.

Of course, how the people in the interaction understand this utterance will also depend on a common (presupposed) social history that includes an awareness of Mrs. Olson, what sort of coffee she drinks, what kind of kitchen she runs, and whether she seems funny. So, which particular meaning an utterance like “The coffee spilled, Mrs. Olson!” entails and what identities it constructs for the participants will also be partially determined through the talk that follows that utterance and how meanings are taken up in interaction. In this way, indexical mean-
Indexes not only provide cues to referential meaning and participant identities in the speech situation (as discussed previously), but they also provide cues about how language should be attended to in any given interaction. The surrounding context of the utterance “the coffee spilled” helps people in conversation to understand more precisely what the word *coffee* refers to, but also, more fundamentally, whether the word *coffee* is treated as meaningful at all. If, in response to “The coffee spilled …” I said, “Shhh!,” I would be constructing the utterance not as meaningful commentary, but as an intrusion. The meaning of the word *coffee* in this last imaginary interaction, then, is constructed as unimportant. It doesn’t matter if the person is referring to coffee beans or a double-tall latte. Their utterance is simply something outside the realm of current concern. In this case, “Shhh” is a (not so subtle) indexical cue to participants that the referent of *coffee* is irrelevant.

To say that language is indexical, then, is to say that what a word means is context-dependent, how words are used can create new relevant contexts, and whether any of this meaning-making potential is realized at all, is dependent on the kinds of interactions people have around those words. Furthermore, as He (this volume) has argued, indexical meaning accrues through multiple interactions (Ochs & Schieffelin, 1984). The way meanings are indexed over the course of a single interaction and in repeated, patterned interactions influences how people understand (and create new understandings for) both words and events.

**Indexicality and Literacy**

The practice of indexical meaning making in interaction is critical for understanding literacy events. An analysis of indexicality illuminates the processes that construct reading not as a neutral practice, but as a practice that builds on the (presupposed) background assumptions and practices—both oral and written—that surround it. This understanding of literacy has been explored in the theoretical deconstruction of the orality/literacy dichotomy, as well as in empirical investigations of multiple literacies.

In 1973, Hymes made the important claim that literacy, like speaking, is not a skill that can be isolated from the speech community within which it occurs, or from the kinds of interactions that surround it. This theoretical claim called for empirical work, not only ethnographies of diverse ways of speaking, but also ethnographies of diverse ways of writing and reading and the speech communities within which these
activities take place. In this way, Hymes encouraged researchers to begin to explore the accumulated habits and assumptions surrounding reading and writing.

Hymes' recognition of literacy as a cultural practice, linked to oral activity, also opened up a discussion and investigation of multiple literacies. Nearly twenty years ago, Heath's *Ways with Words* firmly established that "mainstream ways" of both reading and talking about print, while often privileged in classrooms, are just one of many sorts of literacy event. Since then, there has been a growing theoretical understanding of culturally variable forms of literacy (e.g., Delpit, 1995; Ochs, 1988; Pérez & McCarty, 1998; Street, 1993). Studies of cross-cultural literacies have illustrated clearly that "pedagogised literacy" (Street, 1993) is just one form of literacy, one that builds on a certain set of assumptions about what sorts of meanings are to be taken from texts, as well as how texts are to be talked about.

However, and this is one way in which the linguistic anthropology of education can contribute to the study of literacies, literacy events not only build on sets of assumptions and previous practices, but they also have the possibility of making new, "creative" meanings. While a classroom literacy event may indexically presuppose certain mainstream habits, indexicality can also be entailing. What a literacy event comes to be will develop in unique and situationally contingent ways through classroom interaction. There may be some regularities to what classroom literacy events look like, and these regularities make it possible to characterize something like "pedagogized" or "mainstream" literacy events. Likewise there may be some regularities in "home"-based literacy events, including those that diverge from typical school events. But there is also contingency and particularity in each school literacy event, and certainly in the kinds of literacy events that children engage in outside of school (Dyson, 1997; Hicks, 2001; Hull & Schultz, 2002; Street, 1995).

How literacy events come to be organized can be traced, in the emergent particular, by analyzing how meaning is construed indexically. So, just as Hymes' original concept of a community-specific, normative "communicative competence" (Hymes, 1972) benefits these days from a more situationally contingent understanding (Wortham, this volume), our understanding of "pedagogized" or "mainstream" literacy events also benefits from an understanding of the situational contingency of these events. Pedagogized literacy events may vary each time they occur, and understanding the particularity of each such occasion might lead to an understanding of how interaction during literacy events shapes children's futures as readers.

In this chapter, to understand how participants in classroom reading events construct literacy to be a certain kind of activity, I examine how
the meaning of reading texts is indexically cued in interaction. I look at two different sorts of classroom contexts to see how indexical meanings and understandings about what is appropriate for a literacy event emerge. Although each context yields literacy events that are constructed through different indexical patterns, both communicate a similar message about reading and what it is for: it is unrelated to students' experiences outside of the literacy event.

**RELATING A TEXT TO A WORLD DURING THE PHONICS LESSON**

Ironically, the clearest case of the context-dependent nature of word meaning can be found in the phonics lessons that Rene, during the second year of the study, attended daily. I say "ironically" because the teacher's intention during the phonics lessons was expressly to limit the context that students would draw on, teaching students to focus exclusively on the phonological context and the rules of word "decoding." These phonics lessons were the meat of the ESOL pullout program Rene went to for about fifty minutes each day. The purpose of these sessions was to provide special reading instruction suited to Rene's language learning needs and those of the several other second language learners at the school. The teacher approached this goal by using a phonics card game. To play the game, each student would take a turn picking a card from a deck in the center of the table. Each card had a word printed on it, and each deck of cards was carefully organized to contain only words that exemplified the phonological rules under study, in addition to those already mastered.

The sterile classroom environment (a small, unadorned meeting room within the school library) also pushed the students to use only phonological context to understand the meaning of these words. Each word was read off the card. There were no pictures on the cards or around the room that might provide extra-textual clues. The students didn't read the words in sentences, but saw them in isolation. Students were to read the words in the absence of cues to non-phonological contexts for understanding them. However, as might be expected, this didn't prevent the students from drawing on contexts even more distant from the literacy event. New contexts for words like *dude* and *witch* were brought into the classroom as students incorporated the phonics words into their interactions. Though the teacher attempted to limit available context, students themselves provided indexical cues that potentially created new contexts for understanding the limited text available around the phonics game-playing table. When this happened, the literacy event changed drastically.
For example, in the following interaction, during the first weeks of phonics game play, Oswaldo picks a card with the word "Dude" written on it. For the teacher's purposes, this word is relevant only as an instantiation of the "magic e" rule being studied. According to this rule, "magic e" changes vowel sounds from short to long, so students were instructed to first cover the "e" and pronounce the short voweled word, (dud in this case) and then reveal the e and pronounce the long-voweled word (du:de):

Dude
Teacher: Did you sound it out? Are you stu:ck?
[Okay.
Rene: [Where? Hh.
Teacher: (covering up the -e- spelling the word first)) -d- -u- -d-. [du:h - u:hd
Oswaldo: [du:hd
Teacher: Yes, du:hd. ((uncovering the -e-)) If you add the -e-, the- the -u- is gonna go oo:. Du:h oo:d.
Oswaldo: dude.
Teacher: dude.

Here the teacher has supplied the rule and Oswaldo successfully utters the letters d, u, and d, as they are affected by the context of magic e: "Dude." Despite the efforts of the teacher to keep the children focused exclusively on phonological context, however, students bring their own associations to bear on the texts (the word cards) in the phonics lesson. As students draw cards from the stack, as they pronounce them carefully, and as they articulate the phonological rules guiding their pronunciation, they also find ways to link those words to contexts broader than the phonological. For example, just after successfully pronouncing "dude" in the interaction, Rene chimes in with his own, more broadly contextualized version of the word:

Dude (continued)
Oswaldo: dude.
Teacher: dude.
Rene: ((laughs)) Hey du:de! ((laughs))
Teacher: ((laughs))

By adding just hey to the word dude and lengthening the long u even more, Rene supplies indexical cues that presuppose a particular understanding of the word dude. As in Gee's (1999) imaginary case of coffee, which takes on different meanings when followed by broom or mop, the word dude takes on new meaning when it is preceded by the word hey. The word hey acts as a cue to which kind of context is relevant to
understanding *dude*. By using the word *dude* to call out to a hip and funny guy, the imaginary recipient of the greeting, “Hey dude!,” Rene also creates a new sort of addressee, just as *Mrs. Olson* entailed a funny kind of addressee in the coffee example. In this particular classroom interaction, even though Rene has strayed from the exclusively phonological context the teacher would like students to be using, she picks up on the humor in Rene’s use of *dude* and she laughs along.

A month later, this word came up on a card again, and another student supplied “hey” and “How you doin’” as indexical cues for the possible meanings for *dude*. This time, however, the teacher didn’t laugh:

```
Dude 2
Osvaldo:  ((picks a card and reads it)) Dude.
Teacher:  Yes.
Jose:      Hey du:de. (.) How you doin’?
Teacher:  Remember (.) don’t talk at the same time.
```

This second interaction surrounding the word *dude* as it came up during the phonics game is more representative of the teacher’s response to these playful student attempts to provide context outside the phonological rules. Indeed, in every other recorded example of student-generated external meaning, the teacher responded either by silencing them directly or by ignoring their comments.

In the example below, the word *chancy* came up from the stack, to illustrate both the -c- -h- cluster and a short single vowel sound followed by consonants. Rene, once again, cues another context:

```
Chancy
Teacher:  -c- -h[- says. (.) (Shh) ((teacher is hushing other students))
Student:  [(ca:n)
Rene:     a:n (.) (cha:n)
Teacher:  Cha:n (.) -c- -y-.  
           (2.0)
Rene:     Chances.
Teacher:  Cha:n::c:y.
Rene:     Chancy.
Rene:     Ohp! (looking at David and smiling)) [Pokémon.
David:    [It’s a Pokémon.
```

As this interaction illustrates, Chancy is a troublesome word when phonological cues alone supply the context for its reading. Rene bumbles his first attempt (“chances”), before the teacher supplies the correct articulation. But as in the *dude* example, once the word *Chancy* is fully articulated, it prompts Rene to add to it, and to
provide indexical cues that entail another relevant context. *Chancy* sounds like the name of a Pokémon character that the other students recognize. David chimes in, verbalizing his recognition of the Pokémon character. (Ironically, Chancy the Pokémon is actually spelled *Chansey*, which contradicts the phonics rules under consideration.) Rene’s reference to Chansey the Pokémon has entailed another context—the context of kids’ interest in Japanese animation. Just as Mrs. Olson entails a realm of hominess, “the richest kind” of coffee, and addressees who recognize this allusion, Chansey potentially entails a children’s realm of fanciful pocket monsters, each with distinct personality traits, powers, and needs (Figure 5-1).

![Figure 5-1. “Chansey! It’s a Pokémon!”](image-url)
But, as the interaction continues, it becomes clear that this is a context that the teacher would prefer not to discuss explicitly. Instead, she proceeds with elicitation of the phonological rules guiding the word's pronunciation.

**Chancy (continued)**

Rene: Chancy.
Rene: Ohp! ((looking at David and smiling)) [Pokemon.
David: [It’s a Pokemon.
Teacher: And you have to tell me [why the -a- is sho:rt.
David: [Chancy. (.) I got it.
Teacher: You need to li:sten. ((looking at David))
Rene: Cause the -c:- (1.0) The -y-.

As Rene and David both recognize the word and its meaning through reference to the world of Pokémon, the teacher insists that they make meaning of this word through phonological context alone, and the interaction transforms into a duel over which forms of context should be used to decipher meaning. This exchange illustrates the multiplicity of orality and literacies that are potential in any reading event. It also shows the distinction between mainstream and non-mainstream, schooled and non-schooled, forms of literacy events breaking down. A *Pokémon* is a quintessentially mainstream figure. It even seems to be the sort of icon that Heath uses in her landmark article to characterize the mainstream literate environment, filled with “animals that represent characters found in books. Even when these characters have their origin in television programs, adults also provide books that either repeat or extend the characters’ activities on television” (Heath, 1982, p. 49). In the interaction described previously, however, the potential for *Chansey* to become integrated into a literacy event is cut short. The context of diverse and beloved pocket monsters and the literacies that surround them is not relevant to this literacy event. Instead, this context comes to be treated (by students and teacher alike) as a disruption in the lesson.

In another duel over relevant context, the students use the word *witch* to index the even more mainstream and traditional world of children’s fairy tales. Again, the teacher insists that the word *witch* be deciphered by reference to phonological context alone, while students insist on realizing its broader indexical potential:

**Witch**

Teacher: ((taking her turn and reading the card)) (. ) wuh-itch. Witch.
Jose: You’re a *witch*. ((in a high squeaky witch-like voice))
Rene: You’re the *which* (*which*?)?
Jose: Hee-hee-hee-hee-hee
Teacher: ((moving to next word)) Qua-**it** (. ) Quit.
Although the teacher performs a reading of this word that draws on phonological decoding alone ("wuh-itch. Wi:itch"), Jose immediately contextualizes the word in a sentence, and with his high-pitched imaginary witch voice ("You’re a witch"). By bringing the index you into the conversation and directing his utterance to the teacher, Jose indexically creates an addressee for his comment and turns his addressee into a witch! But, by pitching his voice high, he gives implicit directions for how to take his comment: it is a funny joke, not a cruel or disrespectful insult. This light-hearted context is further solidified as Rene picks up on the non-serious tone and indexes yet another meaning of this word, creating a "who’s on first" type of punning confusion by calling out, ambiguously, "you’re the which? (witch?)" The teacher, however, as in the previous two examples, ignores the joke, and any indexed meanings that could move reading outside of the merely phonological context. Coincidentally, the next word card she picks and sounds out, *quit*, might also be read as a directive to the joking students, but only if its creative indexicality and the addressees that it potentially entails were considered relevant to this interaction.

As illustrated in the preceding examples, these second language learners have a control of the English language (as well as appropriate use in varied social contexts) far beyond the words on these phonics cards. Furthermore, in these last two examples, the students are (whether intentionally or not) playing with the homonymic character of these words: Chansey/chancy, witch/which. But homonyms are words that phonics rules alone cannot accommodate. Further context must be invoked to understand which word is appropriate. Students’ references to the multiplicity of meanings and their recognition of sound similarities across different homonyms are evidence of their own facility with the affordances of words (Gibson, 1979). Despite the evidence of their clear desire to link written words to worlds outside the text, however, these students’ indexical cues are always relegated to the margins of the game.

This pattern could be represented generally as follows:

1) Teacher and/or student sound out a word (e.g., "Dude")
2) Student supplies indexical cues to point to extra-textual context (e.g., "hey dude!")
3) Teacher treats these cues as irrelevant by ignoring them or explicitly silencing them (e.g., “don’t talk at the same time”)

This pattern of indexical cueing occurred roughly once or twice during each lesson I recorded. More significantly, with only one exception, it occurred every time a student cued extratextual context. In other words, with the exception of the first excerpt in this chapter, the teacher never
treated extratextual indexing initiated by the students as relevant to the literacy event underway.

This pattern indicates not only how student contributions are systematically silenced, but also how reading is constructed in this group. By repeatedly silencing students' links to broader context, this teacher constitutes the reading process itself as unrelated to externally indexed meaning. Just as the meaning of "the coffee spilled" becomes a moot point if I simply say "SHHH!", the students' contextualizations of words in the phonics game are rendered meaningless through repeated interactions in which the teacher silences or ignores these additions. While one of the teacher's goals is to teach children to read by teaching them the phonological rules used to decode words, she simultaneously banishes any other forms of meaning-making from the reading process. Furthermore, by silencing these alternative indexical processes, she constructs these interactions as disruptions to the legitimate reading lesson. In this literacy event, dude or witch or chancy are decodable fragments. Their status as indexes to the students' worlds of experience is not relevant in this context. Thus, reading itself is constructed as unrelated to the socially meaningful worlds and experiences of these learners.

RELATING A TEXT TO THE WORLD DURING LITERATURE READING

It may seem obvious that the interaction surrounding text in a phonics lesson would discourage making associations with meaning outside the text. What may be surprising, however, is that similar indexical patterns occurred in the literature-based reading group and led to the same indexical constitution of the reading process as irrelevant to students' own experiences of the text and the world.

During the first year of this study, 1998-99, Rene's school did not have special services for their ESOL students. Nevertheless, his teacher wanted to do something different for Rene, who, repeating second grade, still was not reading in English (or Spanish) at a first-grade level. Therefore, she took a courageous step. She jettisoned the school-sanctioned phonics program and, based on her own knowledge of children's literature and reading pedagogy, created a special group for him and the other struggling readers in her class. She intended to use children's trade books (rather than the regimented basal readers and phonics exercises prescribed by the school) to instill in Rene and his peers a love of reading and an appreciation for children's literature. One of her key strategies for drawing the children into these books was to elicit their own experiences related to themes brought up in the books. She usually
would scaffold this process by modeling how she relates the books under consideration to her own life.

As I watched her reading sessions unfold throughout the year, however, I found that, even as students were coaxed to share their own experiences, students’ experiences were co-constructed as irrelevant. I say “co-constructed” because, as will become clear in the examples, both teacher and students played a role in achieving this outcome. The co-constructed irrelevance of the particulars of student experience occurred in two general interaction types, described in detail in the next two sections. In both of these types of interaction, students’ description of their own experiences is effaced despite the teachers’ intentions, which she described to me during many of our weekly conversations, to incorporate students’ experiences into reading lessons whenever possible.

**Teacher Relates the Text to Her World**

In one type of interaction during the literature-based reading lessons, despite the teacher’s intent to draw on students’ experiences related to the text, the teacher’s own experiences are the only ones legitimized. On such occasions, this legitimizing of the teacher’s experiences was a joint accomplishment of the students and teacher in interaction. As the teacher struggled to draw on students’ experiences related to a particular theme, students would resist, supplying one-word answers at best, prompting the teacher to provide her own examples. So, as this teacher modeled her own entry into the textual world, the students, instead of following this as a model to use to draw on their experiences, would often fall back on teacher-elaborated meanings and use them as their own. This process resulted in the implicit message that there were particular sorts of experiences students should be bringing to reading—those of the teacher. The following examples discussed illustrate this process. (For a fuller and more ethnographic account, see Rymes & Pash, 2001.)

In all the literature-reading lessons, the teacher asks children, in one way or another, to relate the text to their own experiences outside the text. Students did this eagerly during the phonics lesson, although, as illustrated in the preceding examples, in that context such linkages are rarely legitimized as relevant to reading. In the literature-based lessons, pulling this extra-textual context into the discussion is an explicit goal of the teacher. However, as illustrated next, at times she has difficulty getting the students to do so. As she reads from the book *My Little Island* (Lessac, 1985), in which a boy from a Caribbean island takes a friend to his birthplace and shows him the indigenous pleasures of his life there, she explicitly directs students to make the sorts of connections the
phonics teacher was banishing. In the section of the story under discussion here, the theme of festive foods comes up, as the characters consume a large island-style lunch, including "goat-water stew." The teacher tries to illustrate that, although this dish sounds funny to the children in the reading group, it is quite a familiar treat for the children in the story. She encourages this reading by eliciting their own experiences of special meals, asking them what they like to eat on big celebration days.

In the following interaction, as Damon still puzzles over the odd sound of goat-water stew, the teacher questions another, particularly quiet student, Jamarcus, about the kinds of foods that he likes to fix for special days.

**You Like Steak?**

Teacher: Let's see, what do you fix Jamarcus?
Damon: ((to nobody in particular)) Goat water stew
Teacher: ((Still addressing Jamarcus)) What do you eat on special occasions.
Jamarcus: ((Shakes his head))
Sally: Uhm.
Teacher: What's your favorite dish.
Jamarcus: ((Shrugs his shoulders and looks away))
Stephanie: I like-
Teacher: Uh-a steak?
Jamarcus: ((Nods yes))
Stephanie: I like [(hot wings)
Teacher: [Steak. (.) Okay.

Here, as is common during these read-aloud sessions, the teacher tries to use the text as a springboard to student-generated meanings. And she brings Jamarcus into the interaction by addressing him directly, "What do you fix, Jamarcus?" By doing so, she may, potentially, not only demystify the experiences on the Caribbean island, but also communicate to students that their own lives are legitimate background to understanding a story and relating to characters. But the message that emerges in this interaction is quite the contrary.

As Jamarcus resists the teacher's questions, remaining silent, she gradually scaffolds an appropriate answer for him, rephrasing her question slightly each time. After she receives no response to her first question, she tries again with, "What do you eat on special occasions?" and then "What's your favorite dish?" This relatively open-ended question still elicits only minimal response from Jamarcus, so, finally, the teacher narrows her inquiry into a yes/no question about whether his favorite dish is steak. When the teacher supplies this answer, Jamarcus nods obligingly. Despite the more spontaneous answer volunteered by
another student, Stephanie, the teacher focuses on the answer she has elicited from Jamarcus and then moves on. That the teacher ignored Stephanie's blithely volunteered "hot wings" suggests her concern was focused on drawing out Jamarcus, who was always the more reticent student. These were good intentions, but the result was an interaction the teacher did not intend. A presumably open query for student experience led to a narrowed question, and, then, to the teacher's offer of her own experience for students to use as if it were theirs. Finally, the student's one-word (or, in this case, one head-nod) response is treated as sufficient engagement.

This pattern occurs not only during actual reading, but also during post-reading writing activities related to the books. After reading the book, *Cinnamon, Mint, and Mothballs* (Tiller & Aki, 1993), which describes a boy's sensory delight during a visit to his grandmother's house, the teacher urges the students to write generally about their own grandmothers. Again, she wants the book to be a springboard into the lives of the students. As suggested by the minimal student discussion that follows her reading, however, the students have difficulty using it as such. To urge Rene to begin writing, the teacher has questioned him about his own grandmother and he has been reticent. The excerpt below begins with the teacher asking Rene if he shows off to his Spanish-speaking grandmother by speaking English. After receiving minimal response from Rene, she then goes on to detail what her *own* son, Sam, does, when his grandfather visits:

**Write Down That**

Teacher: Did you show off?
Rene: I speak to her and (she'll go) what?
Teacher: That's what=
Damon: Ms. Miller
Teacher: =Sam does when his *grandfather* comes or grandmother comes. He will (0.4) he says *granddaddy* listen to me play the piano. Or *granddaddy* watch me do karate. Or *granddaddy*- he shows off. All the things he's very proud of. Do you do you do that?
(3.0)
Rene: ((pauses, makes facial expression, and nods))
Teacher: Yeah? Okay. Well write down *that*.

The teacher's directive to "write down *that*" efficiently closes down her session with Rene. While there is evidence that Rene started to make links to his own experience ("I speak to her and (she'll go) what?"), when the teacher says "write down that," most of what the demonstrative *that* indexes is her own previous talk. She is simply linking her own experiences, not Rene's, to the text.
In this case, as in the previous example, there are also interactional contingencies that push the teacher to accept such a minimal response from Rene. In the “steak” example, the teacher’s one-on-one line of questioning with Jamarcus, and her concern to involve him, took her attention from another student’s answer to her original more open-ended question. In this example, as Damon’s interruptive “Ms. Miller” indicates, there is also some pressure for this teacher to take note of other students, and here this pressure shapes the sort of interaction she has with Rene. She doesn’t have the time to draw out Rene’s experiences of his own grandmother more carefully. So the way this reading activity is structured also contributes to the interactional necessity to let the teacher’s rendition of experience suffice.

However, and again against the teacher’s genuinely good intentions, the interaction itself also indexes that the teacher’s experiences and what her own son’s granddaddy does are the kinds of experience that should be drawn on to make meaning out of the text under consideration. A multiplicity of interactional necessities lead to this prototypical pattern during these literature reading and writing activities, but the end result implicitly communicates that texts index only certain kinds of contexts. This is not a lesson the teacher intends the students to learn, but one implicated in interaction.

In the preceding excerpts, the teacher’s own indexical cues to worlds outside the textual word are taken as the one set of legitimate external references. We see no student cueing of outside experience—nothing like the spontaneous indexing of Pokémon, witches, or dudes that came up (but was swiftly stifled) in the phonics lessons. This occurred despite the teacher’s repeatedly stated desire (stated to me and, at times, to the children) to draw students out, to have them relate literature to their own lives, and through the process to bring literature alive to them. While in both settings the students’ experiences are constructed as outside the process of reading, in the phonics class this is primarily accomplished through the way the teacher treats student-volunteered contributions. In these literature lessons, this devaluing of student experience is a more clearly collaborative achievement.

Paradoxically, students’ reticence in these exchanges seems to arise out of the very intention of the teacher to penetrate their reticence. As mentioned, this teacher is taking a risk by treating reading as something other than basal readers and decoding exercises. The risk is not simply institutional. In fact, institutional risk was mitigated since the teacher had obtained permission from the administration to modify her curriculum. The primary risk, as illustrated in these exchanges, is interactional. She is working within a school culture in which literacy is typically administered in a series of tightly controlled basal readers and associated phonics exercises. More generally, she is working within a
culture that treats schooling as a set of displays of learning, and talk of genuine experience as a disruption to that display (Rymes & Pash, 2001). This context brings with it a certain set of expectations from these students. The teacher in this case continually frustrates these expectations by asking questions that are not meant to lead to displays of "right answers," but to a portrayal of the particulars of the students' lives. The students' frustrated expectations are made evident in their reticence about responding to the teacher's often open-ended prompts (often they seem to be waiting for the teacher to provide the "right" answer). This reticence, in addition to the teacher's responsibility to attend to the needs of all the students, led the teacher to further scaffold student contributions.

The result is the following prototypical pattern:

1) Teacher prompts for experience→
2) Students are reticent→
3) Teacher provides example of her own relevant experience→
4) Students use teacher example as their own experience.

As in the phonics lessons, this pattern indicates how the experience of reading is being constructed in this group. The difference here, however, is that student voices are not silenced after they say something. In these examples, student voices are silent from the start, in part, it seems, through the institutional expectations to which they have been inculcated before this teacher began her curricular innovation. But, instead of drawing them out, through her scaffolding of these difficult interactions, the teacher substitutes her own voice for theirs. Although this pattern, and certainly the content of these interactions, differs from patterns established during the phonics events, the way reading is constructed interactionally is similar: Reading need not be related to students' own lives. The teacher's life will suffice.

**Students Really Do Relate the Text to Their World and Interests**

There were rare moments, however, when students in the literature group were not "silent from the start." On these occasions, students initiated question sequences, using contexts outside the book and their own experiences, unprompted, to flesh out words they were reading inside the book. In this type of interaction, however, while students did volunteer their own additional readings of text under consideration, the interaction that followed didn't build on possible entailed meanings, but instead closed off entailments to focus students' attention back on the text.
For example, in the excerpt below, one student notices that in the story *My Little Island* whites are the minority (Figure 5-2):

**Race of characters**

Sally: They're white and everybody else is black.

Teacher: [Shh:::* (aside to other students)]

Teacher: Oh, so her friend is white and everybody else is black in the picture.

Damon: ((to Sally)) Hey don't be talking about that.

Teacher: ((Suddenly serious in tone)) What is wrong with that?

Damon: Nu'n ((Damon shakes his head))

Sally: Nothin'

Teacher: Is there anything wrong with that?

Students: No. ((Sally shakes her head))

Teacher: No, I didn't think so either, but that was really=

Sally: ( )

Teacher: =neat that you. But look at there ((pointing to the illustration in the book)). It was neat that you pointed that out.

Figure 5-2. "They're white and everybody else is black."
Here, Sally's remark ("They're white and everybody else is black.") and Damon's response to it ("Hey don't be talking about that.") raise numerous tangled issues, and the issues rest on the ambiguity of that's referent. Does it refer to Sally's bringing up the issue? The fact of whites being in the minority on this island? Race relations in society at large? Race relations in this reading group? There are multiple possibilities, but the interactional context points to some as more likely relevant. While nothing in Sally's utterance explicitly directs our attention outside the text and visual image, certain features of Damon's utterance and its contextualization provide cues for construing his that as presupposing a set of social issues beyond the pages of the literature book. If he were referring to the picture in the book exclusively, his swift directive not to talk about something would be nonsensical in this context, since talking about pictures is what this reading group does frequently. Furthermore, his dialect, African-American Vernacular English, indexes his own membership in the "black" category and, as such, it presupposes that the literacy event itself is taking place among a mixed-race reading group. So the reading group itself is implicated as a relevant context for discussion of issues of "black" and "white." (Indeed, one might ask, why is this group of "struggling readers" majority "black" when the school is majority "white"?)

The teacher's response to their exchange also provides evidence that that refers to a set of cultural norms that she does not want to address explicitly in this reading group. Her sudden response to Damon's command, accompanied by a distinct change in tone from vivacious storytelling to no-nonsense rhetorical questioning, also constructs his utterance as one that indexes issues that are not to be discussed in this setting.

Thus, despite the teacher's intention to use literature to include students' experiences in the reading process, her responses in this excerpt work to ensure that Sally's remark be treated as one about the picture alone. Immediately following Sally's remark, the teacher strategically adds the more specific "her friend" and "in the picture" to index that the source of understanding for this statement is the concrete picture in the book. Damon's nearly simultaneous statement, "Don't be talking about that," builds on Sally's observation to construct a moment in which race relations among the teacher and the diverse students are relevant to the characters and the text in a book they are reading. However, the teacher transforms the student-generated opportunity for links between text and their own lives into a rhetorical question with only one answer: "What is wrong with that?" To which Damon and Sally both respond, "nothing." As if to emphasize that there is only one answer, she repeats the question again, in yes/no format: "Is there anything wrong with that?" coaxing "no" out of the remaining students.
and an additional head-shake "no" from Sally. Whatever the referent for*that* here, the force of her rhetorical question ensures that whatever *that* is, it will not be discussed further. And her closing statement, during which she physically points to the picture in the book, solidifies the picture in the book as the appropriate context for construing the meaning of *that*. She praises Sally for "pointing *that* out" but ignores the possible entailments of *that* implicated through Damon’s command (and her swift contradiction of it).

In contrast to her unsuccessful teacher-initiated attempts to draw students’ lives into the story illustrated in the previous examples, in this excerpt the teacher is presented with an ideal opportunity, initiated by the students, to call on their own lives to understand the text under consideration. However, in this instance she seems reluctant to be drawn into students’ perceptions of issues outside the text. Through this interaction, the teacher communicates that there certainly is nothing wrong with talking about the pictures in the book. But she seems hesitant to discuss race relations in the students' own lives or the reasons *why* there are often uneven distributions of black and white people, or, for that matter, why there are proportionately more black people on a Caribbean island. Ironically, Damon made these issues surface by commanding *not* to talk about them. And the teacher, despite her claim that there is nothing wrong with *that*, doesn’t let them talk about it. Like the phonics teacher, but with regard to more touchy subject matter, she seems threatened by students’ capacity to index certain kinds of context outside the text. And her responses, like those of the phonics teacher, rein in the context-creating entailments of *that*.

This complex intersection of student curiosity, socially complex topics, and the reading of children’s literature could potentially be a site for transformative literacy events. It is during these moments—when the possibility of socially complex topics arises—that students can read text as contextualized within their own experiences in the world, and possibly as a source of knowledge about that world. However, in the preceding example, the specter of race prevented the teacher from capitalizing on the connections the students were (potentially) making.

In the next example, at a similar intersection of a socially complex topic and book reading, the word *gay* sparked a possible discussion on sexuality. Here, the teacher and students had been reading a book, *Crow Boy* (Yashima, 1976), about a shy and creative boy, who is ostracized by his peers in school.

**The Word Gay**

Teacher: Okay, together. (*(students read along in unison)*) “He showed how crows call when they are happy and gay”

Damon: What does *that* mean?
Teacher: Happy. Just really happy.
Sally: [But why do-
TC?: Happy and gay.
Teacher: I know, well it's just another way of saying that. Just like
you would make [a:
Rene: [A gay bird is like .]
[ ( )
Teacher: [No this would be. This is what they said when uhm
excited and happy and elated. [All the words
Rene: [When somebody says
like "you're gay."
Teacher: That's [not i:t.

Here, as with the words "black" and "white" in the previous example, the word "gay" entails new contexts, outside the immediate context of the text they are reading together. In the previous example, Damon's "Don't talk about that" presupposed the previous mention of "black and white," but it also had multiple potential entailments. Here, his "what does that mean" presupposes the previous reading of the word "gay," but also entails other possible meanings. What ensues is a familiar battle of competing contexts for interpretation. The teacher insists that the only appropriate context for the interpretation of this word is the sentence they just read together. In this context, gay means "happy, just really happy." But Rene articulates another possible context for this word by giving voice to someone who might taunt you on the playground ("When somebody says like, 'you're gay.'"). Being taunted on the playground, in fact, is a common experience of Chibbi, the main character in Crow Boy, the book they are reading. And a fuller discussion of this sort of ostracism would certainly be relevant to the text here. Damon's calling attention to one particular word children in his school use to taunt each other, and Rene's articulation of how this word is used, could have led to a felicitous link between the text and everyday experiences of the children reading it. However, immediately after Rene's enactment of the word gay, the teacher, with determined closure, excises this context from relevant consideration, by saying "That's not it." Again, despite her goal to elicit experiences from students to contextualize reading, she vetoes this experience as relevant context for construing the word "gay."

However, unlike the previous interaction, in which discussion of race issues outside the text is "successfully" silenced, in this interaction discussion of the word "gay" is more drawn out. The students are more insistent, and they won't let the teacher interactionally silence them. Even after the teacher's brusque "that's not it," Sally goes on to insist on an alternative meaning:
The Word *Gay* (continued)

Teacher: That's [not it].
Sally: [I thought it (me:ant )].
Damon: Ye:ah, I'm happy.
Teacher: Right.
Sally: So, I thought that it meant that a girl likes another girl.
((laughter))
Teacher: We::l[it].
Rene: [I'm happy.
Sally: That's why it [(.) it was a long time ago.
Teacher: [But we've heard it la:tely.
Sally: That's what it was a long time ago.
Teacher: We've read two book lately though and it's had the word in there hasn't it?
TC: Ye:s.
Vanessa: [Ye:s.
Teacher: [Do you think some words, their meanings may change? (1.0)
Teacher: That looks like o:ne, doesn't it? Or they may have mo:re than one meaning.
Sally: When are we gonna do the scissors?
Teacher: We (. We're gonna do that in just a little bit. Okay. Next o:ne.

Sally, here, has followed Damon and Rene's lead, pursuing the alternative understanding of the word *gay*, and the battle over relevant context for its interpretation continues. The teacher enforces her meaning by validating Damon's utterance "I'm happy" with "that's right." Sally counters with the taboo definition of "gay," claiming that "happy" is an old definition for "gay." The teacher latches onto this rationale—yes, word meanings change—then shifts to a more accurate explanation, that some words "have more than one meaning." This is not only a more accurate explanation, but it is probably also more situationally appropriate and comfortable for the teacher. This is the kind of talk about language that is sanctioned in the context of school-based literacy. However, this explanation also serves to end any previous discussion. Sally, no longer hot on the trail of a definition of *gay* or how it applies to playground taunts or the story of *Crow Boy*, now asks when they can use scissors.

The result is that students leave the interaction with the understanding that the meanings they bring to a text will be treated as unrelated to the reading process. The result is *not* a discussion of how this book illustrates an issue endemic in schools—social cruelty and intolerance of difference. Although the discussion of the word *gay* might seem like a tangential reference when students first raise it, understanding the word *gay*—the students’ own definition of it, and Rene’s own contex-
tualization of how this word might be used by peers—brings into the conversation a situation that mirrors the predicament of the book’s protagonist. Indeed, as the teacher collects the reading books from her students, she summarizes the story’s theme, saying it shows “how we should accept people’s differences and that all of us are unique and have different talents don’t we.” Although this might have been a theme perfectly applicable during the discussion of the word gay, this particular sort of “difference” isn’t admitted into the conversation as an appropriate contextualization for the text.

Instead, in these situations, in which students use indexical cues to suggest taboo meanings for text or pictures in a book, the teacher dismisses the cueing of contexts external to the text and eliminates the possibility of their relevance for understanding the text. In contrast to the previous examples from this literature-based reading group, in which the students were reticent to provide answers, these examples illustrate students actively contributing to the discussion, then being rebuffed.

But there are points of similarity between these two sets of examples. Both reveal the extent of the institutional and interactional risk this teacher has taken by choosing to infuse the curriculum with literature that might prove relevant to students’ lives. While she had the courage to read this literature, she doesn’t have the interactional experience to handle students’ responses that arise from the content these books cover. Since this teacher is working within a school culture in which literacy content is controlled by the phonological features under study, the community provides no experience (for the teacher or the students) with discussions in which more complicated issues are raised through literacy events. In the first set of examples from these literature reading sessions, the teacher frustrated the students’ expectations by asking them open-ended questions. In these examples, the students frustrate the teacher’s expectations by providing overly open-ended comments about touchy issues like race and sexuality. In the first set of examples, students’ frustrated expectations are made evident in their reticence about responding to the teacher’s often open-ended prompts, when they seem to be waiting for the teacher to provide the “right” answer. In these “touchy issue” excerpts, the teacher seems to be the reticent one, closing down student inquiry in an attempt to return to the “right” kind of classroom interaction.

The recurrent pattern here could be represented as follows:

1) Teacher and/or students read text (e.g., “Gay”) ➔
2) Student supplies open-ended indexical cues to point to extra-textual context (e.g., “When somebody says like “you’re ga:y.””) ➔
3) Teacher implicitly dismisses (or greatly minimizes) the cueing of contexts external to the text. ("That's not it.")

In contrast to the previous examples from the literature-based group, in which the teacher needs to pull information from students and ultimately provides her own, in these situations the students provide potential connections of their own that start the interaction, but the teacher closes down the indexical links being made by the students. Just as we saw in the phonics lesson, the participants in this example and the previous one seem to be battling over relevant contexts for interpreting what words or pictures mean. Here, the teacher insists that gay be understood only in the context of the happy crow, rather than in the broader context of playground taunts—or for that matter, the thematic context of the book. And during the discussion of My Little Island, even as the student utterances implicated larger contexts, the teacher insisted that the picture be the exclusive source of relevant context. The result in all these sorts of interactions, then, is that students and teacher participate in repeated interactions that imply reading is not related to their own experience in contexts outside the text.

In most of the literature-based lessons, the students resist by being silent from the start. Despite the teacher’s attempts to elicit their experiences in the context of reading, they usually keep to themselves, or depend on teacher coaxing to mention outside experiences they relate to the texts they read. Even in the previous two examples, in which students are providing links to text that come out of their own experiences, they are nevertheless, if not completely silent, at least avoiding the lesson from the start. They are, after all, drawing attention to words and images that may be interesting to them only because they are known to presuppose topics that teachers don’t like to discuss. In this way, by offering of troubling topics for discussion, these sessions accomplish much of the same implicit lesson as the phonics lessons. “Topics that teachers don’t like to discuss” in the context of the phonics lessons is a far broader set. Those students need not reach far to index context that will be stifled by the teacher. They can achieve a playful camaraderie, through avoidance of the teacher’s lesson, by a simple mention of a “dude” or a “witch.” In both the phonics group and the literature-based reading group, however, teacher reactions to student-initiated extra-textual indexing communicate similar messages. Despite differences in content, teachers and students co-construct literacy events as events through which teachers, not the students, control what is relevantly cued context, and what is not. As a result, the topics (Pokémon), issues (race representation, sexuality), and even ways of speaking (Hey Dude!) of intrinsic interest to students, emerge as irrelevant to literacy development.
If linguistic anthropology is to provide any meaningful insight to education, the relevance of micro-analysis, as in the examples given here, needs to be related to a broader social context. As Heath writes, "literacy events must also be interpreted in relation to the larger sociocultural patterns that they may exemplify or reflect" (1982, emphasis hers). A superficial and sympathetic look might suggest that both reading groups examined here were working against the damaging and unjust sociocultural patterns of society at large. These teachers were intending to undo the damage caused by a system that too often fails students like Rene and his peers. And, indeed, the system was also helping these students by providing the resources to have small group instruction and, in the case of the second year, an ESOL "specialist" in the employment of the school. These teachers and the school personnel were also working to ensure that these children were not falling through the cracks.

But on closer inspection, despite the genuinely good intentions of teachers and administrators to ensure that these students would not fall through the cracks, in both cases students’ contributions were falling through the cracks. The benefits of small group interaction and the camaraderie of fellow ESOL students in one case, and the focus on literature and students’ experiences in another, were minimized, as literacy events in both reading situations were constructed as events in which the teacher’s cues to indexical meanings were privileged. So, despite the possibility of equal opportunity provided through school administrative structures and innovative curricula, the interactions within these groups seemed to reproduce those larger sociocultural patterns that would have excluded these students in a less subtle way had no intervention been organized either by the teacher (in the case of the first year) or the school administration and federal law (in the case of the second year).

Nearly thirty years ago, Hymes called for "a great deal of ethnography" (1973, p. 71) with the goal of providing a catalogue of equally valid literacy and other cultural practices. However, a current linguistic anthropology of education recognizes that, in the rapidly changing field of cultural production within which children and teachers operate today, the exploration of multiple, pre-existing forms of communicative competence is not enough to unearth persistent inequities. As interaction in these reading events has illustrated, successful communication is shaped also by momentary contingencies. Educational researchers interested in all student voices still need to be able to account for exactly how student contributions enter and are taken up in interaction, and
how contexts for learning are created and recreated everyday. Or, as Hicks has put it, how we are to put students' "social practices and identities in dialogue with new ones" (Hicks, 2001, p. 221). Clearly, the students discussed in this chapter are not using the same discourse patterns as their teachers. They do not chime in when these teachers want them to, and they do not always supply the relevant information and external experiences that these teachers will ratify. They do begin to make contributions that could be drawn on. However, drawing on students' own contributions is a complex process that is more fine-grained and situationally specific than simply recognizing and ratifying home-based "ways of speaking." It is also a process that can be examined, through interaction, during literacy events.

Just as the concept of "communicative competence" can benefit from analysis of its situational contingencies, so can the concept of "multiple literacies." The distinction between, for example, home-literacy knowledge or pedagogized literacy is an important starting point for understanding literacy events, but these days children do not come to school with one monolithic "home literacy." There are many potential contexts in any reading event, and these contexts are often created of the moment through the indexically entailing properties of language. Students may be very fluent in certain aspects of mainstream literacy, perhaps even more so than their teachers. *Pokémon* characters, for example, are quintessentially mainstream figures and, as we saw, the ESOL students indexed this mainstream world through their references to Chansey during the phonics lessons. But Chansey's presence, and its potential as a foundation for literacy, was swiftly covered over by the teacher's agenda and the students' familiarity with classroom order.

Despite higher-level social policy that mandates certain forms or methods of instruction and despite research that investigates and validates multiple literacies and ways of speaking, interactions that take place in "reformed" classrooms, if left unanalyzed, might persistently reproduce status quo approaches to literacy and, in turn, larger social inequities. Despite surface innovations, interactional patterns in both of these reading groups continued to construct literacy in limiting ways, as these groups practiced reading as if it were unrelated to the interests and experiences of the children learning to read, or, for that matter, to any aspect of a world outside the text and the teacher. The research here also suggests that, if analyzed, interactional contingencies can override larger social forces that structure reading in school as one limited kind of activity. Literacy practices can be expanded to incorporate student commentary when it occurs, often by some happy and unpredictable contingency. A discussion of the word *gay* and an elaboration on the spelling and meaning of *chancy* (and *Chansey*) might be far more memorable reading events than the regimented recitation of a literature story.
or a recall of that story through the teacher’s life experiences or a series of cards in a phonics game. Regardless of policy or methodological mandates, if I want my students’ voices to be valued, I can work with them to change how interactions work in my classroom.

It is my hope that the tools of linguistic anthropology of education can illuminate this process of change by closely investigating interactions between people, texts, and levels of social reality in schools. The promise of a linguistic anthropology of education is its capacity to relate the classroom word to a changing world.

REFERENCES


