SOCIAL CONTEXTS FOR ETHNIC BORDERS
AND SCHOOL FAILURE

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1. Introduction

This paper considers the recently popular claim that many minority children fail in school because there is a mismatch between their procedures or codes for making sense with each other and the codes used by their teachers who generally come from a socially more powerful group. In most claims, the emphasis is on the fact that the minority and majority group members have different languages, dialects, gestural systems, or interactional rhythms, etc., that they accordingly produce much miscommunication with each other, and that in the classroom such miscommunication leads to alienation and failure. This paper is different in that, while we do not deny that communicative code differences exist, we emphasize that they are secondary to the political relations between members of the different groups both in the classroom and in the larger community. We claim that constant miscommunication between teachers and their pupils is no accident, that it, in fact, represents an interactional accomplishment on the parts of all those involved given the conditions under which they are asked to come together either to teach or to learn how to read and write.

Primarily, we offer an analysis of only a few moments of some minority children miscommunicating with their teacher and failing in school. But we offer these moments as a systematic part of the contexts in which the teacher and the children are immersed. The most immediate context is that of the children and the teacher trying to understand each other while face-to-face during their reading lessons. At this level, everyone appears to make sense in that they simultaneously act upon and respond to each other’s behavior in systematic ways. In terms of the organization of a given piece of face-to-face behavior, what appears to be a miscommunication may be a carefully arranged and sensible way for all the participants to proceed, given the interactional and pedagogical problems confronted by members of the classroom. We present an analysis of such a case in Section III.

By itself, the detailed analysis of the good sense of a miscommunication will leave the reader confused. What is needed is an account of how the classroom came to be organized in such a way that the development of codes for miscommunicating came to be a sensible adaptation. The usual account of miscommunication and school failure simply in terms of communicative code differences does not deal with this difficult task. Instead, it usually is assumed that people from different groups are naturally different and that their differences can be in the long run irremedial; with such an assumption in hand, it is not necessary to show how people develop vested interests in being different from one another. Our point is that without such vested interests being created from one moment to the next, people usually develop metacommunicative procedures for altering their communicative codes in order to make sense of each other. When communicative differences become irremedial, it is because there are sound political or economic reasons for their being so. No matter how hard the dominant group is trying to equalize access to resources, no matter how downtrodden the minority group, every group is somehow getting a maximum payoff, given their starting place within a political economy.

In order to give this point some substance, in Section II, we concentrate on the political circumstances in which people alternatively de-emphasize, emphasize, and even create communicative code differences. And in Section IV, we attempt to sketch out the higher order contexts in terms of which the sensible, but ultimately damaging, miscommunication analyzed in Section III came to be, in the short run at least, adaptive for all. By way of conclusion, we suggest that in the long run such arrangements are maladaptive in that they have consequences that in no way maximize the potentials for the population under analysis, and we raise questions about the worth and morality of school systems that are geared to sorting young children into successful and unsuccessful categories instead of being geared to socializing everyone for a maximally rich experience of the world.

The setting for our analysis is a first-grade classroom in a comparatively successful school in a suburb not far beyond the New York City limits. School failure by minority group children was quite visible in this classroom. Shortly after the start of the school year, most children were ranked into one of three groups on the basis of the teacher’s analysis of their reading abilities. The top group consisted of white children, primarily Italian and Jewish. The bottom, or least literate, group consisted of three Puerto Rican, one black and finally two white children, one of whom was considered the group’s best reader and destined to move into a higher group, the other of whom was considered brain damaged. There was one other Puerto Rican boy who was originally assigned to the bottom group, but who
had been put out for being too disruptive. Thereafter, the boy had no reading group, and he wandered around the classroom causing trouble. The one other minority child in the class belonged to the middle reading group.

So five of six minority children are in the bottom group or in no group at all, despite the efforts of a teacher who was considered excellent by her peers, and incidentally, by us. The teacher of this class gets the most difficult first graders into her room each year and is often successful in teaching them the basics of classroom behavior and reading. However, in the year under analysis, not all the children emerged with such survival skills, and by the end of the second year in school, two Puerto Rican children and one white boy, all from the bottom group, had been reassigned to special schools for various functional handicaps, namely, for being “slow,” “emotionally disturbed,” and “brain damaged.” Essentially, the children were sent to special schools because their teacher found them impossible to work with in the classroom. The other children in the group were not doing too much better in that they were not learning to read up to grade level, a sine qua non of institutional success, but at least they had escaped placement (for the moment) in a slowed down program.

The process just described is in no way unusual to schools. Selection for failure is common in many kinds of social institutions (Auerswald, 1971; Moore, 1975). There are some who have mistakenly used ethnicity to explain this phenomenon in schools. The claim is that there is something about a child’s membership in a certain group that is predictive and causally related to the child’s success or failure in school. Two basic versions of this argument stand out. One is that there is something wrong with the children; because they are biologically incapable, cognitively or linguistically deficient, or motivationally misdirected, the children are unable to keep up in school. The other is that the children are merely different and misunderstood. Space does not allow for a discussion of the first set of theories, but there is good reason to reject each of them on the grounds that they are neither logically coherent nor descriptively adequate (Cole, Gay, Glick and Sharp, 1971; D’Andrade, 1973). Fortunately, the work showing the inadequacies of these theories is persuasive enough to allow us to direct our attention to the argument that minority children fail in school because they communicate differently and are accordingly unappreciated and misunderstood.

II. Ethnic Differences Do Not Cause Irremediable Miscommunication

According to the second set of arguments, which we call the communicative code account, members of minority groups do less well than others in school because the schools generally are staffed by majority group members who do not understand minority group children (more sophisticated versions of this argument point out that even when the schools are staffed by minority group members they are likely to behave in accordance with the majority group communicative code, resulting in the same sort of miscommunication taking place). This argument is most appealing when we consider large differences such as those that exist between a teacher who speaks only one language and students who speak only another. The case for the smaller systems of differences, i.e., systems of touching, spacing, gesturing, speaking rights, etc., can be argued along the same lines. People with different communicative codes may want the same things and work equally hard at achieving their goals, but, to the extent that they do not share codes for making sense with members of the dominant groups, they will misinterpret each other’s behavior and eventually create unpleasant environments for each other. It is in such unpleasant environments that minority children begin to “act up” and become alienated from the teacher and the learning enterprise.

This stand is attractive. For one thing, it holds out great hope for the children; it assumes they can all do well in school if we could only build more sensitivity for communicative code differences into our teachers. It also has the advantage of not off-handedly condemning the teachers as incompetents or racists. Like all of us, they have had limited experiences with people in different cultures, and once they become sensitive to the codes of the children, they can be the helpful and loving teachers they no doubt would like to be.

As attractive as this stand is, we have been forced to conclude that it is much too simple. Certainly, when the communicative resources of two groups are different, the people will generate much miscommunication. But the question is why this keeps generating problems. Why do the people not repair the miscommunication? This line of thought leads to an even more difficult question, namely, why are there communicative codes at all? Increasingly, there is reason to take the position that different communicative codes represent political adaptations; in the course of talking or moving in one way rather than another, children and teachers are doing politics. If this is so, we all not only suffer from communicative conflicts, we help to make them. Our communicative codes, as persuasive and entrapping as they are, do not turn us into communicative robots incapable of coming to grips with other people simply because they communicate differently. The social world is subject to negotiation. If codes exist, it is because we all help create them in the very process of communicating. If codes are keeping us apart, it is because it is adaptive for us to do so, given the constraints imposed on our behavior in the social order constituted by the codes. Ways of speaking and moving harbor political systems that we all help to recreate with our every movement and utterance (Beck, 1975; Hynes, 1961, 1973; Labov, 1972a, b; Scheflen, 1973, 1974).

There are a number of reasons for understanding the communication problems between members of different groups as the accomplishments of people trying to get the most out of the political and economic contexts for their being brought together. We will briefly mention some examples from the growing literature on interethnic communication and then present a detailed analysis of a case of a child supposedly miscommunicating with his teacher. From the literature, three kinds of examples stand out: (1) there are cases in which members of different groups make an effort to move beyond a major communicative code difference, for example, a difference between two mutually unintelligible languages; (2) there are cases in which one would think it would be easy for members of dif-
their children to schools to learn English, which the parents feel is the language of the successful, a feeling they apparently share with both French and English speakers of Montreal (Boissevain, 1970; Fender and Lambert, 1973; Lambert, 1967). In New York City, Puerto Ricans are exposed mostly to Black neighbor and co-workers, and the children first become competent in Black language (Wolfram, 1973). Although Black English is useful in the most immediate politics of everyday life, in the long run the children are forced to learn a more standardized English in order to get by in the larger urban scene. The result in both these cases is populations with three different codes for their participation in the three different communities. People who do not become trilingual can suffer exclusion from certain institutions.

Along with their adoption of languages, immigrants and their children also make drastic shifts in their kinesic behavior. In a stunning effort, Efron (1941) long ago showed that the Jews and Italians of New York City altered their gestural patterns in accordance with the demands of the immediate situation. The same Jewish student who would barely gesticulate when he talked with his professors at Columbia University would be far more active the next day back in the Jewish community where he could wave his forearms and button-hole his friends without being considered conversationally aggressive.

Even without the extreme example of immigration, the social science literature is filled with accounts of people overcoming structurally complex communicative code differences in order to make sense of each other on certain occasions. The fascinating records of whole groups together generating pidgin and creole languages come from all parts of the world. Usually the processes are more complex than the “Me Tarzan, you Jane” model of pidginization, but this example serves the purpose of showing that when the circumstances are such that people must understand each other, they will find a way. Most often, such pidgins develop among different groups of people who have much interaction with each other in the market place of a third and more powerful group and, under such conditions, it is good to have a way of communicating with each other without becoming part of the dominating market society (DeCamp, 1971). Similar processes have been demonstrated on the kinesic level by Erickson (1975, 1976 and this volume), who has shown that members of different ethnic groups alter their communicative styles to fit “panethnic” groupings made up of various ethnic groups aligned according to the dictates of local politics; for example, Blacks and Puerto Ricans in Chicago would fall together against Irish, Poles, and Italians on one hand, and WASPs on the other.

2. The case of people’s refusing to repair minor communicative code boundaries also makes the point that the divergence of communicative patterns into mutually exclusive codes must be understood in terms of their function in interaction and not simply in terms of structural differences. The differences between the vernacular English of many American Blacks or the creole English of many West Indians are minute compared to the differences between mutually unintelligible languages. Yet these smaller barriers to mutual intelligibility appear to be much more difficult to overcome in schools and other institutional contexts.
den, et al., 1972; Craig, 1971). What makes a difference is the politicization of language and dialect differences in the schools in which the children are asked to learn.

In fact, some research efforts are beginning to show that dialect use by Black children in American schools actually increases as children proceed through school (Hall and Freedle, 1975; Labov, 1972a; Pietsrup, 1973). Given the correlation between dialect use and success in school in numerous minority-dominant group settings, this is an important finding that can give us a rough sense for the social processes underlining the emergence of communicative code boundaries together with falling school records. Labov and Robins (1969) have shown, for example, that the use of dialect increases as peer-group participation increases and school performances decline. This result is further illustrated by Pietsrup (1973) who found that in the first grades she analyzed, the Black children’s use of dialect either stayed the same or soared in direct proportion to how much the children were hassled for their use of dialect. The more their speech was corrected, the more they used dialect, and in such classrooms, reading scores were low. In classrooms in which the children were allowed to express themselves and read orally in dialect, the use of dialect did not increase and their reading scores were higher, with many children above the norms.

The presence or absence of dialect in the children’s speech is not the crucial determinant of successful communication in school. Rather, dialect appears to function as a focus for the relational work of the children and the teacher. If the teacher and the children are alienated from each other, their dialects will take center stage and the teacher and the children will battle each other about the proper way to speak. In this sense, the emergence of a dialect in each new generation of different minorities represents more than a passing on of a set of speaking skills. It also represents an active adaptation to conditions in classrooms across the country. And the conscious claiming of a dialect, or any other aspect of a communicative code, from a clenched fist to a particular kind of walk, represents a political activity, a statement of one’s identity as a member of a particular community.

3. The point that communicative codes are not determinants of people’s relations with each other, that they are in fact adaptations to the various relations between the people who use the codes, is most clearly made by cases in which a group invents a communicative code in order to build cohesion into the home community and to block out the surrounding communities (Halliday, 1976; Gmelch, 1976). The Pennsylvania Dutch (Amish) are a good example of people who work at keeping themselves different, and they specify these differences not only at the level of general values against modern life, but at the level of the minutiae of everyday communication, at the level of language and dress, right down to the kinds of hooks used to fasten their clothing together. Such communicative strategies can have an effect on classrooms. The code differences do not in and of themselves enhance or detract from the children’s learning. But the work that the Amish do to make themselves different apparently does interfere with the children’s performance in public schools, where they do not do well academically. But this same work apparently creates a communal learning environment in their own schools in which Amish children do well, even by the standards of state tests (Hostetler and Huntington, 1971). These differential school results can only be understood in terms of the mutually distrustful relations between the Amish and the surrounding communities, on the one hand, and the positive relational environments generated by Amish teachers and children, on the other (McDermott, 1977).

The same may be true for Black Muslim schools, which have apparently been more successful than public schools in the education of Black children in America (Shalaby and Chilcott, 1972). Certainly the Black Muslims work hard at defining their school as a special place carved out of an ugly racist and criminal environment, and this work can be seen in their efforts to create a unique communicative system for members of their community to use in their dealings with each other and outsiders. The use of Islamic symbolism and food taboos does much to accomplish this goal and the Black Muslims until recently have given the impression of being dominated by the secrets of the esoteric wisdom of the East, by what new adolescent initiates in the mid-1960s called “heavy knowledge” (Labov, Cohen, Robins and Lewis, 1968). Members also developed a special code for addressing each other in Arabic and fictive kinship terms, and they dress in ways that mark them off from the Black and white communities in which they are immersed. Upon entering school every day, each child is searched for candy and other prohibited items, a fascinating communicative device that informs every child that the door to the school or mosque is no ordinary door and that behind it lies a whole new world of meaning. This is further reinforced by the children, particularly the boys, being taught to adopt a special military, square-cornered walk for their time in school. By building such elaborate communicative code differences with the surrounding communities, the children are made to feel like part of a coherent community that is cut off from the evils of the outside world.

The three kinds of examples we have just cited should demonstrate that an account of minority group problems in school in terms of communicative code differences is too simple. Certainly communicative differences exist across groups. And certainly, we notice these differences more among the children who are failing in school. But to suggest that these differences cause misbehavior and failure in school is to make a cause out of what is more likely only an effective medium for expressing the political and economic relations between the different groups. In order to disentangle this hypothesis, we will have to locate some situations in which some minority children are failing and specify the role of communicative code differences in their behavior with the teacher. Our notion is that when ethnically specific patterns are used and appear to cause trouble, the cause of that trouble will not be with the communicative code disparity but with the function of the disparity in the relations between the students and the teacher in the classroom. The relations between the teacher and the children will be the key to the member’s interpretations and evaluations of the importance of ethnic borders and school learning in their lives with each other (McDermott, 1977). With this in mind, we will present an account of a teacher and a child having trouble with each other in ways that could be understood in terms of a communicative code conflict, but which upon analysis appears to be a function of much mutual understanding of their circumstances by the child and the teacher.
III. A Context Analysis of the Function of a Miscommunication

In the classroom we introduced above, there was a Puerto Rican boy who was assigned to the bottom group for most of the year. There Juan (as we shall call him), made life miserable for all, and much of his time was spent being put out of the group or chastised while in the group. Although we never tracked this boy’s activities alone, there were times when he would show up in our notes more than ten times an hour as the focus of a disruptive incident in classroom routines. Later in the year, the teacher became concerned enough to have the school officials discuss his case as a candidate for a special school for disturbed children. And this is where he is today. By the time the films were taken, this child was no longer a part of the bottom reading group. He was in no group at all, and he either busied himself with little projects the teacher gave him or he wandered around the classroom interacting with the other children, interactions that often led to disagreements. When the bottom group was at the reading table, he appeared to monitor their actions carefully, and any disturbance usually was followed by his showing up at the table anxious to participate.

We should mention how we came by our observations; one of us was in the classroom throughout the year observing behavior and recording it in a notebook, on Super-8 film mounted in one corner of the room and on videotape often centered on the reading groups. We did not attempt to code the data that we abstracted out of the records for purposes of statistical manipulation as it was our conviction that the patterned nature of the behavior in the classroom must emerge on the participants’ own terms from an intensive analysis rather than by being imposed a priori. With that in mind we carefully analyzed tapes of the top and bottom reading groups at work and identified how the participants struggled to understand and organize their own behavior. The result was a complex structural analysis, only a diluted example of which will be presented in this section. By virtue of the extended observation in the classroom and a more detailed interactional analysis, as in McDermott (1976), we feel our statements about Juan and ethnic borders are warranted.

On one occasion, Juan came to the teacher complaining that another child was bothering him and that her intervention was necessary. It came at a time that the teacher was working with the bottom group in a reading lesson. She was standing in front of the group writing a word on the board. All were quite involved. At this point, the young boy started across the classroom shouting the teacher’s name, “Hey, S____, you better tell him to stop!” The teacher ignored the boy until he reached her and made contact by touching her on the buttocks. Thus, the boy violated two apparent rules of mainstream culture. He skipped the teacher’s title and used only her last name in trying to get her attention.

He got her attention by contacting a prohibited area. The teacher immediately responded to the boy’s touch and gave witness to the violation status of his attention-getting techniques. She turned quickly and left the bottom group without instruction as to what they should do next. She took the boy by the arm to a corner near her desk where she had a brief conversation with him before they broke contact.

The discovery of this behavior was easy. The boy violated not only the teacher’s rules for contact, but our rules also, and we attended to his violation almost immediately. With a little more looking at the videotape it became probable that the teacher was not pleased with the boy, for throughout the year, when the teacher was annoyed, the same arm raising procedure was used. The procedure consisted of the teacher raising the child’s arm to a height that made the child dependent on guidance for a means of transport.

So we have some behavior that can be used as an anecdote relating ethnicity to miscommunication. The child wanted the teacher’s attention, went about it in the wrong way, and got nothing but trouble for his efforts. The teacher in turn has the trouble of being hassled and having to hassle the child. No one is getting what the institution has defined as desirable. At first, we thought that the problem was simple. People from different cultures have different systems for doing touch. The teacher is a rather classic Northern and Eastern (non-Jewish) European in this regard, and she has little tactile involvement with other people in public. This should be difficult on the Mediterranean and Caribbean children who come from more tactile cultures and who could suffer relational mishaps with the teacher because of their different ways of making sense (Efron, 1971; Hall, 1966; Schefflin, 1974). This little anecdote supports this notion. Numerous other examples can be found in the literature on cross-cultural communication in educational settings (Byers and Byers, 1972; Collier, 1973; Dumont, 1972; Erickson, 1975, 1976; Mehan, 1973; Phillips, 1972).

With this supporting literature, it is easy to jump from the anecdote to conclusions. One is that the boy is working with a different communicative code than the teacher and unwittingly causes some trouble for himself by not learning her code. The second response is that the teacher should be aware of the child’s different way of proceeding and should be more adaptable in order to give the boy the most satisfying relational environment in which to learn and adapt to mainstream culture. In this way, it might be possible to minimize miscommunication and restrict the possibility that the boy might eventually work at achieving school failure, rather than school success.

But two other questions have forced themselves on us. One, given the adaptability children display in many of their activities, why is it that this boy is not using the mainstream code to get the teacher’s attention? Why is it that after nine months in school, he still has not figured out the teacher’s rules for addressing and touching? Is it possible that there are other contexts for this behavior than is obvious in the anecdote? Two, might there be more reasons for the teacher being annoyed than is obvious in the anecdote? The teacher generally displays tremendous patience with the children. Is there something else going on than simply a touch deemed inappropriate in the teacher’s native culture? Is it possible the boy is breaking more rules than those of the culture at large? Is it possible the boy is breaking rules that govern the relational work between the children of the classroom and the teacher? And is it possible the teacher’s annoyance is only a part of
more inclusive contexts for the sequencing of their behavior? The anecdotal
description we offered cannot be used to address these questions. Instead, we
need a description of the people's contexts for their behavior as they are defining
those contexts and using them in the organization of concerted behavior. Fortunately, both the theory and the method of context analysis has been well
worked out (Bateson, 1955; Birdwhistell, 1970; McQuown, Bateson, Birdwhistell,

Perhaps the most immediate context or environment for people's behavior is
the answer they might collectively give to the question "What is it that is going on
here?" or "What's happening?" (Frake, 1964, 1976; Goffman, 1974). Many have
shown that it is possible to locate people's answers to this question, because
people must constantly inform each other of what is going on in order to continue
producing concerted behavior with each other. So much of the behavior of mem-
bers when face to face is related to this task that it would seem to be the sine qua
non of any interaction (Birdwhistell, 1970). Verbally, they keep each other in-
formed by formulating or keying what it is that they are doing for everyone to
hear most clearly by naming, although usually members are less explicit (Hymes,
1974; Sacks, 1974; Wieder, 1974). Kinscally, they do this by moving and posi-
tioning their bodies in relation to each other in particular ways at particular times.
Thus, what it is that people are doing together can be seen in the positions or
postural configurations they work out for each other (Kendon, 1973; McDermott,
et al., 1978).

In the bottom group, the children and the teacher move in and out of three
different major activity types, only three of which will be considered in this paper.
These are the most immediate contexts for their answers to the question that they
constanty put to each other and to themselves, namely, "What's going on?" As
these were located primarily by an analysis of postural shifts performed by the
members, we will call them positionings (Figures 13.1-13.3).

For our present purpose, it is only important to know that each of these
positionings is marked by a different kind of work at the outer boundaries of the
group. That is, depending upon which of the three positionings the children and
the teacher assume, outsiders to the group appear to have different degrees of
license to enter the group. This is not an unusual phenomenon, and an outsider's
rights to enter a group have been clearly documented as subject to the postural
work of the people already in the group (Kendon and Ferber, 1973; Schefflen,
1971, 1976; Schultz, 1976). For example, in the bottom group, when the teacher
is out of the group and the children are waiting for her return (positioning III),
outsiders are invited in to visit. When the children are struggling to get a turn to
read from the teacher (positioning II), the children carefully monitor the teacher's
activities; accordingly, no one is invited in, but if outsiders have business with
the teacher, they will usually make an entrance. However, when the children are
actively engaged in reading with the teacher no outsider enters the group. Interest-
ingly, the top reading group assumes this organization throughout its reading
lesson and is never disturbed by outsiders.
Now we must reconsider the boy's attention-getting behaviors in terms of the immediate contexts in which they occur. The behaviors occur at a special time and must be understood as they function at that time. With such a reconsideration, for example, the teacher does not have to be such a cultural imperialist to respond in the way she does. No one except this boy enters the reading table while the group is reading (positioning I). The top group is never disturbed, and when a member of the bottom group even went near the top group while the members were reading (positioning I), the teacher, three top group members and one member of the bottom group at the other end of the room conspired to prevent a possible disturbance by chasing the boy back to his part of the room. On the other hand, children from the top group often disturb the children of the bottom group while they are at the reading table, but never enter the table while the bottom group is reading (positioning I). This avoidance is no accident, for there are examples of a top group child entering the periphery of reading activity (positioning I), waiting until it is complete, and finally moving in to address the teacher at the start of the children calling for a turn (positioning II). The only case of a child violating a reading positioning comes when Juan enters and contacts the teacher's buttocks. Suddenly, this episode does not look like a simple case of culture conflict. The conflict at hand is not between the patterning of behavior of Caribbean Spanish versus that of Northern and Eastern European. It is far more localized than that. Given the particular ways of doing the order of the classroom, as that order is negotiated, formulated and done by the teacher and the students for their moment-to-moment life in school, the important question here asks how it is that this particular boy becomes involved in conflicts of scheduling as well as conflicts of naming and touching. Whatever the reasons, the teacher's reactions appear to be quite sensible.

More context must be considered for the boy's behavior. Recall that the boy was formerly a member of the bottom group and has since been put out. However, the boy still monitors the group's activities quite carefully. For example, every time there is a disturbance while the teacher is away from the reading table and the children struggle, squirm and fight, this boy shows up on the scene. During one such episode, a child takes a pencil belonging to another child and throws it to the floor at the other end of the reading table. The pencil has barely hit the ground as the boy in question runs across the room and picks the pencil up. Later, when two children square off in an argument, the prodigal child again appears on camera examining the scene. The boy monitors the group carefully and gives evidence of knowing the difference between the three positioning. More examples are possible, and each of them would contrast the boy's entering behavior in the buttocks scene to the boy's usual behavior during a reading positioning, in which he moves past the table the same as everyone else, without any disturbance whatsoever. So there is some reason to think that the boy moves to the table misaddressing and mistouching the teacher at a time that he understands as inappropriate.

Can we still talk about the teacher and the child, miscommunicating? The child appears to have mastered the basic rules of the classroom and simply uses them for a different purpose. What could be the function of his behavior? Remember that the teacher takes the child to a corner and chastises him (unfortunately out of the range of the microphone). What happens next is interesting. The teacher then goes off camera to the back of the room where she is picked up by another camera. There she chastises the boy that Juan was complaining about. On her way, she is followed by Juan, in no way crushed, clapping his hands and delighting in the fact that his adversary is also getting into trouble. The plot thickens. In short, he received from the interaction what he might have wanted all along, namely, to get the other child in trouble, no mean feat in a classroom in which the teacher discourages snitching, particularly while she is busy working with a group. So the small anecdote locating a miscommunication, if properly contextualized, shows the miscommunication not only to be sensible, but quite functional as well.

It is not as easy to locate the teacher's behavior as functional. By placing her behavior in its larger context, we have located that her annoyance was based on more than a misunderstanding of cross-cultural norms for touching. Rather, her behavior appears to be based as well on a "knowledge" of the interactional norms governing her particular classroom. The boy breaks the rules and the teacher chastises him for it. Up to this point, her behavior makes sense, but then she crowns his efforts by attending to the matter he brought before her in the way he might have hoped. She breaks the first rule of classroom management by rewarding a person for breaking the rules and norms she otherwise enforces. Meanwhile, the bottom reading group is wasting its time on the other side of the room; a fight has started and reading has stopped. A good portion of the class is also disrupted by this episode. There is little reason for him not to proceed in the same way at another time. How then can we say that the teacher's behavior makes sense? The answer to this question is in no way complete, but consider the following pattern.

Often, as the bottom group gets into a positioning II in which they are struggling for a turn to read or a positioning I in which they are engaged in reading or some other lesson activity with the teacher, they are disrupted by the teacher yelling at the rest of the class or actually leaving the group to attend to outsiders. The teacher's attending to the boy's behavior in both a negative and positive way at a particular time may have to be understood in terms of this larger pattern of the teacher exiting from the bottom group at key points, when the group is highly focused around a particular task. By way of inference, it can be claimed that the teacher is uncomfortable with the bottom group once it is settled and ready for instruction. In terms of the readiness of some of the children to engage in reading activities, the teacher's response to the bottom group is quite understandable. It is easier to teach children how to read when they already know how to read. The top group does not present the problems the bottom group does. If this is the case, then the teacher's positive response to the boy's request appears to be a self-serving activity in that it is a way of getting out of the group for a little while. In the long run, everyone pays heavily for this escape, but in the short run it is to everyone's advantage; the boy gets someone in trouble and the teacher and the children in the bottom group get a brief rest from their intense organizational negotiations.
By placing the behaviors described in the anecdote within the contexts in terms of which the people engaged could possibly understand and act upon them, a quite different interpretation of this anecdote is possible. A miscommunication cannot be understood without asking about the constraints on each person in terms of which their miscommunication may be adaptive. After this question is answered in terms of the contexts negotiated by the participants, a miscommunication may look quite sensible. The little boy and the teacher appear to understand each other quite well, and they prey on each other's circumstances in order to enhance their respective standings within those circumstances. How then can we talk of communicative code differences causing misbehavior and failure in school? Juan demonstrates an understanding of the world in which he operates. It is hard to imagine how Puerto Rican culture inhibits his participation in the classroom. He and the teacher get a maximum amount of use of each other given the pressures of the classroom on each of them at that moment. The consequences of the adjustments they make to their circumstances are the mutually regressive understandings we see at evidence in this account. Juan and the teacher seem to have agreed unknowingly on how to communicate with each other. Their choices are adaptive given their circumstances. We will now have to give some attention to what these circumstances might be and, in terms of these circumstances, we will have to consider the longer-term consequences of their behavior.

IV. The Circumstances and Consequences of Miscommunication in School

Just what are the circumstances that make this miscommunication functional? In other words, how is it that things are set up so that many children, particularly minority children, have the kinds of problems just detailed? Our argument is that schooling situations offer less of a payoff for many minority and poor children. Most often, it is not the case that the schools are staffed with teachers consciously trying to keep minority children from succeeding in school. Nor is it generally the case that there is something wrong with the children as they enter school. Although these two explanations are the most popular accounts of minority school failure, we suspect that cases to which they actually apply are rare, and we will not deal with them as such. Our problem is neither racist teachers nor dumb kids. Our problem is that our school systems are set up to have conscientious teachers function as racists and bright little children function as dopes even when they are all trying to do otherwise.

More specifically, our claim is that poor and minority children start school knowing less about how to read and write than do the children of the enfranchised groups that survive in the modern nations via literacy skills. This is in no way a deprivation argument. We are not suggesting that the children of the minorities do not have the skills for immediately learning how to read; we have only suggested that many have not learned how to read before they come to school.

From everything we know about the proper age for starting to learn how to read around the world, being more or less prepared at age six should have no effect on the eventual acquisition of literacy by the children (Want, 1976). Yet, given the nature of the classrooms in which the children are asked to catch up, learning to read at school becomes an organizational impossibility.

In the early grades, schools are best set up for reinforcing and practicing what children have already learned at home. When minority children show up in school not knowing how to read, they are placed in special groups like the one described in this paper. The teacher's job is not only to teach them how to read, but to make sure that they achieve a certain competence and demonstrate it on a standardized test by a certain date. In other words, the teacher is trained, paid, and held accountable for producing certain kinds of reading children by a certain date. Children in the bottom group create difficult organizational and pedagogical problems for the teacher. Many of the communication problems that exist between teachers and minority children can be understood as mutual adaptations to these organizational problems. For example, in the classroom we analyzed, the teacher handled the top and bottom groups quite differently. With the top group, the teacher likes to have the children take turns reading, one after the other, from left to right, around the table. This is not possible with the bottom group, because there are children who cannot be expected to read any page that comes along. So the teacher spares them some embarrassment and picks a special reader for each page. This means that she cannot divert her attention from this group for more than a minute without their needing her direction in picking a new reader. Concentrated attention with the bottom reading group is hardly possible while the teacher has two other groups and some stragglers busy (and not so busy) in other parts of the room. Accordingly, the members of the bottom group are often left without direction about how to proceed in their reading lesson, and they spend more than half their time waiting for the teacher or trying to get the teacher's attention to their pleas for a turn to read.

Recall the three positions that the members of the bottom group achieve with each other; two of them, getting-a-turn and waiting for the teacher (positionings II and III respectively) pit the children and the teacher in a struggle for each other's attention. The top group shares only the first positioning with the bottom group, the one in which all the members focus on reading. Now recall that these three positions are different in that they allow different visiting rights for outsiders. The fact that the top group stays in the reading positioning (even when they are not actually reading) means that no outsiders enter the group during its lesson. However, by adapting to the teacher's procedures for calling on special children for special pages, the children in the bottom group arrange themselves into positionings II and III, and suffer constant interruptions from the children in the top group entering to ask the teacher questions during the bottom group's time at the reading table. Each of these interruptions further necessitates the elaborate procedures the children in the bottom group develop to get the teacher's attention in order to get a turn to read. Juan became so good at getting the
teacher’s attention in unorthodox, but situationally adaptive ways that he was put out of the bottom group. As we have seen, he still exercises his communicative skills by entering the group in the way that he does. Other children in the bottom group are developing similar skills.

The case we have made for circumstances that nurture miscommunication in the classroom is as follows: Various children, most of them poor or minority children who are not submerged in literacy skills at home, come into school behind their peers in reading and present difficult organizational and pedagogical problems for their teachers who are pressured to produce children with certain skills of reading by a certain date; the teacher and the children make adjustments to each other’s organizational quandaries; and the consequences of these adjustments are institutionally regressive, but sensible and functional forms of communication that appear to us as cases of miscommunication and misbehavior.

There are two important consequences of such apparent agreements to miscommunicate in the classroom. By way of their participation in such classrooms, the children from the bottom group fall in school and achieve the same places their parents hold in the social structure of the community. And in the case of the minority children in the bottom group, they acquire an ethnic identity that is not defined simply in terms of the values and behavioral styles of the group, but in terms of their group’s antagonistic relations with the more dominant groups. Both these statements deserve some warrant.

We have suggested that the children in the bottom group come into the first grade not knowing how to read. They start off behind. Then they are put into the bottom group where they suffer the organizational problems we have described. The significant fact is that although they spend the same amount of time at the reading table as the children in the other groups, due to all the interruptions, two-thirds of them initiated by the other groups, they get only one-third the amount of time as the children in the top group get in a reading positioning. The rest of their time is spent in attentional struggles with the teacher. The net effect of this is that the children in the bottom group fall further behind the children in the top group for every day they spend in the classroom. The alternative to this is that they learn how to read at home. If they do not do this before school, they apparently do not do it after they enter school, and they get caught in the communication systems that accentuate this discrepancy. Placement in the bottom group of this classroom (and classrooms without such tracking into ability groups appear to get much the same job done in different ways) works like a self-fulfilling prophecy in that the children in this group consistently get less concentrated, quality instruction than the children in the other groups. And this is the case for an excellent teacher who cares deeply about the children. We all know that teaching a first grade is a difficult job, and this particular teacher is excellent under the circumstances. We are only suggesting that learning to read in a first grade classroom may be even more difficult for the organizational reasons we have highlighted.

Without learning how to read, there are few other paths for upward mobility for minority children in modern nations. Thus the children achieve the same adap-

tional skills of their parents, and a new generation of the so-called disadvantaged takes its place in the world. If we wanted a mechanism for sorting each new generation of citizens into the advantaged and the disadvantaged, into the achieving and the underachieving, we could have done no better than to have invented the school system we have. Not only is it efficient in assigning many generations of the same people to the top and bottom slots, but, and this is one of the ironies of contemporary life, it does so in ways that make sense to the hard working, caring, and talented people who are trying to help break the cycle of the disadvantaged becoming more disadvantaged and the advantaged becoming more advantaged.

Lastly, we want to note that the ethnic border conflicts that mark all the nation states and plague most modern cities are reinforced in the classroom. People need a way to explain the persistent failure of minority children in schools. Rather than taking a look at how this is done, as we have tried to do here in only a limited way, most of us have ethnic labels available for talking about and explaining the failure of the different kinds of children. Ethnic group membership does not cause school failure or success, but after different kinds of children differentially succeed and fail, ethnicity becomes salient in negative ways. In the classroom we have just analyzed, at the beginning of the year, the white, Black, and Puerto Rican children divided their time with each other without regard to ethnicity. By the end of the year, the two Black children, the four Puerto Rican children and the eighteen white children began to form isolates. By late May, the terms "nigger" and "spic" began to show up, and border fights between members of the different groups became a daily occurrence. How this happened is worth another paper. We are pointing to this phenomenon now because we believe that it flows rather directly from the experiences we have described for the children in this classroom. For it is the minority children who engage in the bulk of the miscommunication with the teacher. Under these conditions, ethnic solidarity becomes a refuge from the negative relationships offered to the children in the classrooms. In this way, the experience of belonging to a group was transformed into an experience of having enemies. The problem in this classroom was not ethnicity, but a set of contexts in terms of which ethnic differences were turned into ethnic borders.

Hopefully, ethnic differences will survive the many homogenizing influences of the modern world. We will need differences to keep us alive to the variety of ways we potentially have available for celebrating and humanizing each other. However, when ethnic differences become a source for ethnic borders, we must attempt to overcome the conflicts; we must attempt to locate for ourselves how we are helping to create the conditions for transforming differences into borders. Unfortunately, even if we achieve some semblance of intellectual clarity on the subject, there is considerable question as to whether we will be able to stop our own participation in the creation of borders without considerable change in the institutional demands with which we must deal in our everyday life. Many of our institutions certainly get in the way of maximizing the social and psychological potential of our children, and most of us do not have the foggiest notion of how to proceed.
In rectifying the situation, efforts at achieving institutional reform consistent with our growing knowledge of the constraints and possibilities of human behavior, efforts such as those formulated in a stimulating paper by Church (1976), will have to form a far greater focus for our activities.

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A Parting Note