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"Why" Sheila Can Read: Structure and Indeterminacy in the Reproduction of Familial Literacy*

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If Nancy Hanks
Came back as a ghost
Seeking news
Of what she loved most,
She'd ask first
"Where's my son?
What's happened to Abe?
What's he done?"

"You wouldn't know
About my son?
Did he grow tall?
Did he have fun?
Did he learn to read?
Did he get to town?
Do you know his name?
Did he get on?"

Rosemary Benet (1962: 65)

The poem we use as an epigram says it all. Here is a mother worrying that her son ill not learn to read, will not get on. We know that Nancy Hanks' son, Abraham ncoln, did learn to read, got to town. He got on and we know his name. We instinc-

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tively agree that if he had not learned to read he would not have gotten on and we would not know his name. We recognize the proper anxiety of the mother.

The motherly (and fatherly) anxieties and the assumption of a linkage between reading and adult success are still with us. They are crucial elements in the cultural scripts that help us converse about careers in our societies. The vocabulary may have changed from what it was 100 years ago, but the concern is the same. We still fear that our children may not learn to read. Interestingly, Nancy Hanks is not made to ask "Did he go to school?" She asks "Did he learn to read?" It is well known that Lincoln did not attend the great schools and universities of his time. He gained his education on his own. And, in the great tradition of American self-sufficiency and personal agency, this seems particularly appropriate. We know that Lincoln's personal biography is exceptional and totally atypical. But we also want to say that he really did it on his own because of some powerful inner quality that made him struggle against the odds, and eventually, win. Nancy Hanks does not ask: "Were the political conditions in the United States such that he could get on?" She does not ask: "What happened to his friends? What were the conditions that made it happen that we do not know their names?"

The questions that Nancy Hanks does not ask are questions that most of us, as parents in America, do not often ask. They are questions that those who have been given the political duty of transforming a parental worry into a scientific search unfortunately do not ask often either. If "Johnny can't read," it is probably for the same kind of reason that allowed Abe to learn to read; there is something in him that prevents him from running as fast as the others. Thus most research in education has focused on individual differences, many of them considered inherent to the person. In some cases, researchers, like parents, suspect that something that happened to the child may have helped or hindered a successful school career. It might be some characteristics of the family, perhaps its income, or the educational level of the parents, or their drive. It might be some early experience that the child had had, a matter of sex, birth order, constitution of the family (is the father present?), and so on. In any event, it is assumed that these experiences are "acquired." They become the property of the child and make him a particular kind of person who then becomes the agent of his performance in school. Rarely, if ever, does an inquiry into what makes some children learn to read and others not force a look at the structure of the social system in which the children live. It is as if the proper anxiety that parents in America have about children and learning to read could only be dealt with as a question about a child—by asking "Why can't Johnny read?"

In this paper, we argue that a focus on why individual children in our study[1] "can" (Sheila) or "cannot" (Joe) read keeps educators from asking the most crucial question about the conditions of the practice of literacy in and out of school. In particular, such a focus prevents educators from wondering about the forces that make everyone ask why a

[1] The fuller report on this study is available (Varenne, Hamid-Buglione, McDermott, & Morison, 1982). Ann Morison's dissertation (1982) offers a solid account of fieldwork in Joe Kinney's family. Two other papers are also based on the study (Leichter, 1984; McDermott, Goldman, & Varenne, 1984).

hild can or cannot read. Why do these questions about "can' or "cannot' make so much ense? They certainly do not make sense because of anything the child does. They make ense because of something "we"—as participants in the American institutional ramework—do as we jointly create the institutional framework within which we must hen act. Children do not learn in a vacuum, but an interest in "learning environments" hould not simply lead to search for antecedents to a child's performance. Such an inter- st must also lead to search for what happens after the child has acted. It must lead to an nvestigation of the institutional consequences of different kinds of performances. It nust also lead us to an investigation of the symbols that allow us to communicate about uccess and failure. In brief, we want to ask new questions and point to the kinds of nswers made possible when the concern about our children is examined as a cultural nd institutional fact.

We placed quote marks around "why" in the title to this paper to make visible its hetorical power. In educational research, such "why's" are transparent. They have the roperty of focusing the inquiry away from the questioner onto the child. Simply to ask why Sheila can read" does not force us to wonder what difference it makes that *she* can ead (while Joe cannot), or how it became enough of a cultural focus that someone fficially decided that she *can* read (while Joe can *not*). If we simply focused on Sheila's nstitutionalized, that is to say, measured reading skills, we could easily miss the differ- nce between "knowing how to read" as an everyday life event embedded in other famil- al activities and "knowing how to read" as a school event. We could also easily miss the act that families themselves are in the business of enforcing this "school" distinction. Even when the school is not particularly good to them, we want to argue, families *make* The School.[2] To focus on Sheila (or Joe) obscures the social forces that organize her eading into an institutional concern and a symbolically recognizable fact.

Above all, simply to ask "why Sheila can read" makes us lose sight of the fact that, rom a systemic point of view, Sheila is not the issue even when we are interested in her ite. The issue is the culture that determines the framework within which, and the tools vith which, she will make her fate. It is not irrelevant to Sheila that she lives in a ulture that uses school failure to affirm individualism by differentiating persons hrough presumed substances that are given to them, for example, talent, intelligence, rive. From a cultural point of view, equality is the negative side of inequality; it is oninequality. American democracy must generate inequality so that it can display its

[2] By "The School' we mean a cultural system of political consequences, that is, a set of historically de- ed, comparatively arbitrary, interactionally constraining, discourse conventions used to deal with experi- ce. These conventions can take the forms of traditional sayings, typical conversations, more or less ualized performances, legitimately constructed consequences, and so on. When talking about "The School' do not mean any particular school except in so far as all schools, and all families, must organize their daily s in terms of The School (and The Family).

own struggle against it.[3] These, we want to emphasize, are not "macro-" concerns that could be safely ignored when looking at the details of the everyday life of a child and her family. The work the two of us have been doing on reading lessons, and cooking clubs,[4] small towns and suburban high schools[5] have been attempts to demonstrate that institutional and cultural constraints are intimately lived. The reflexive constitution of inequality is essentially invisible to participants precisely because it is performed by all the people in the details of their everyday life, whether they struggle to "get ahead" or protest against the need to do so.

It is only with a cultural approach that we can understand how people live and learn their way through everyday life. The people in our study, like us, worry that their children will not succeed. Like us, they celebrate when their children succeed. They struggle to make such celebrations possible. Like us, they worry whether Sheila, five years from now, will not simply know how to read, but will know how to program a computer. They do not simply "value" education; they work at it and they criticize those who appear not to work at the education of their children. It is not enough to say that they "view" education in the same manner as "the school" views it. It is necessary to notice that, everyday, they pay for it, work at it, worry about it, and cherish what it might deliver. These acts are the behavioral consequences of the cultural structure.

Even as their biographies unfold before them, people's lives are "uncertain." They cannot rely on their past to determine their future. They must constantly build this future. But they cannot build *any* future. To understand the limits on their possible futures is to understand the "structure" of their lives. For Sheila and Joe, this means that, without work, they cannot be whatever they will be. It also means that the uncertainty is not radical; it is structured by the two relevant possibilities: success and failure.

At the heart of this paper are the practical acts performed to separate children into individuals with differential attributions of success and failure. We are particularly interested in the processes which prevent educators and reseachers in education from articulating their role in the sorting of children as successful or not in such a way that it

[3] The underlying argument in this paragraph is a development of Dumont's argument about the specificity of American racism (1980). For Dumont, the peculiar character of the justification for racism ("Blacks are not fully human" or, in "modern" terms, "intelligence is a genetic matter") is dependent on the political implications of individualism and democracy: if "all men are created equal" and have "certain inalienable rights," then one must justify the alienation of rights on the grounds that the targeted group is not quite human. The best of America is structurally homologuous to the worst. Our further argument is that democratic individualism must also generate a special kind of inequality in order to deal with differentiation: since class distinctions cannot be a matter of birth or religion, then it must be based on individual differences.

[4] McDermott and Gospodinoff (1979); Hood, McDermott, and Cole (1980).

[5] Varenne (1977, 1978, 1982, 1983).

an have political consequences. To address these issues we report on an ethnographic tudy of two children as they, their families, and communities weave literacy into their aily life. The next part of the paper introduces Sheila, Joe, and their parents. In order o make our argument about the relationship between structure and indeterminacy in he practice and reproduction of familial literacy, we focus on three kinds of literacy we ound in Sheila and Joe's houses. First, we look at "familial" literacy, that is, literacy hat is used in passing through the daily round of life at home. This is the literacy that oes not reveal itself as a topic for evaluation. Second, we look at the symbolic power of special" kinds of literacies in the families' lives. These are literacies that are highly harked symbolically—though again not as a topic of evaluation. As we show, the spe- al language of medicine has a power over the lives of the people that is quite different om the power of their own language. While related to the language of the school, the nguage of medicine does not raise issues of school evaluation.

This brief look at various types of nonschool literacies leads us to a more detailed ook at a third type, the type that we understand as controlled by The School, namely, omework. We examine this home-school interface initially in terms of what the fami- es do not control, specifically, the cultural forms that make an activity "homework" ather than, say, "curing-an-ailing-child." We suggest how the family members in- olved in the homework hold each other accountable for maintaining the School frame. hen, we look at variations in the doing of homework to suggest how families can "dif- r" in what they control while still being controled by the school structure. We close he paper with some comments on the "coherence" of failure.

HEILA AND JOE

n the shadow of cosmopolitan Manhattan, "Kingsland" is one of those areas of New ork City that preserves the provincial atmosphere of a small town; narrow streets, low apboard houses, and neighbors a parent can rely on to keep track of the little ones. It a working class, white, ethnic enclave that is best understood in terms of its borders.[6] he area is small, and racially different people dwarf the neighborhood into efensiveness. Natives think of it as a great place to have lived, but each generation arns to move on. The road to success and the road out are parallel and education is sential to both. Those who have made it have taken their degrees, moved to the sub- bs, and return on holidays to visit the older generation.

Both Sheila Farrell (age 10 in 1981) and Joe Kinney (age 9) live in Kingsland. Both eir families think of themselves as "Irish" and draw on Irish ancestors to make their se. This does not prevent them for dating and marrying "outside" their group. The rrells and the Kinneys are inserted into their neighborhood in quite different ways. r. Farrell is a truck driver. Mrs. Farrell held various jobs until the birth of her second ild. Now she stays at home, near the center of a large group of close kin: her parents

[6] See Susser (1982), Suttles (1972).

and six siblings who live in three nearby houses. At another extreme is Mrs. Kinney who is the only one of her siblings to have stayed on the block of their youth. She has been separated from Joe's father, a salesman, for two years. She must spend most of her day outside the neighborhood, as a clerk in a government bureaucracy. Her family circle is expanded only to her mother who takes care of the children from the time they get out of school to the time when she comes back from her work. At that point she is by herself with Joe and his sister.

Sheila and Joe do not know each other though they live only a few blocks from each other and go to the same Catholic school (in different grades). Neither of them is highly remarkable among the students of this school. They were chosen initially because their parents told us that Sheila was "doing well" while Joe was "not doing too well." We must emphasize that the contrast lies in the parents' evaluation. It is interesting as evidence that the parents are in the business of evaluation.[7] As a matter of fact, it soon became clear that the formal contrast (as "objective measures" could determine it) was not great. Initially, it is perhaps easier to characterize both children as "typical" preteenagers from a working class, American-ethnic neighborhood. This erases a lot of the differences that do exist between them and their parents. Even if they are not exceptional, Sheila and Joe are unique in the details of their lives. They are still interesting to us as tokens of a type.

FAMILIAL LITERACY

Both the Farrells and the Kinneys are literate in the broad sense that their literacy is not a practical problem in either family. They can read what they need to read to conduct the life to which they have been accustomed. This does not mean that all the members of each family have the same "amount" of literacy. There is much variation between individual members in formal level and actual use of education. Some people never read much more than the sports page of the newspaper. Others have gone to college. Some will prefer to have recipes explained to them by someone who has already made the dish rather than read it. Others will keep up extensive bulletin boards of familial events. Both families expect the children to possess an unspecified but rather well-bounded level of familial literacy. When Sheila is asked to turn the coffee machine on "PERK," she is fully expected to be able to read the switches and, of course, she can. Similarly, whatever the opinion Mrs. Kinney may have of her son's success in school, she too relies on Joe's literacy for the performance of a large number of familial tasks that require

[7] Of course, it is not simply that parents are in the business of evaluation. It is that we, as researchers into educational processes from a "teachers" college funded by a "national " institute of "education," set the parents to evaluate their children. The "criteria" for selection of the families, as these were set for us by our own context (the funding agency and a tradition of scholarship), were that some of the families to be studied had a child "doing well" and some others a child "not doing well." Initially we had to inquire of parents whether they had such children. It remains that the parents had no difficulty entering into a conversation about the relative merit of their children in school terms.

specific, though perhaps limited, acts of reading. Both Sheila and Joe possess all the literacy they need to participate in their families' life within the social structure of their community. Indeed, it seemed to us that they already had the literacy they needed to occupy the type of working-class occupations their parents held.

We are making here a general, though difficult, point. The literacy of the Farrells and the Kinneys is a systemic literacy, not a personal one. It is not one for which the members are accountable in the same way as one is accountable for one's literacy in a second- or third- grade classroom. One does not "fail" familial literacy. Indeed, everyday literacy is all but invisible in the family. It is embedded in other tasks such as getting the right thing at the store, writing a card to a relative, or letting the children know where everyone is with a note on the refrigerator door. At such times, literacy as such is not highlighted.

Typical of this "passing" quality of literacy is an incident that entered our field notes in some detail. The Farrell's baby had contracted conjunctivitis. After considerable consultation among the many women in the extended family, it was decided that the infection could be treated at home with some eye ointment Mrs. Farrell had in the medicine cabinet.

> Mrs. Farell brought out a small bottle of ointment on which was written "Ophthalmic Ointment." She proceeded to read the small print on the label to see if it contained the ingredients that she remembered are found usually in such medicines from her previous experience with conjunctivitis. She was not totally convinced. She turned to Vera [the fieldworker] and asked her opinion. Vera read the label, said that it was probably alright but that she did not feel comfortable taking chances with medicines. Mrs. Farrell agreed and turned to her husband, asking him to phone the pharmacy to ask the pharmacist's opinion. Mr. Farrell asked her why she didn't phone herself, to which she confessed she felt embarrassed. Mr. Farrell called the pharmacist and read aloud the information on the label. At almost every point of his explanation and reading, Mrs. Farrell interrupted to correct both his inaccuracies in pronunciation and in points of fact. He was visibly irritated, but nevertheless changed his words to accommodate her criticisms. Eventually, it was established that the ointment was the correct one.

This incident is paradigmatic of the kind of scenes in which literacy is used in such families as the Farrells and the Kinneys. Here is an event, a baby's sickness. One must perform a joint action to resolve it. Analytically, the process of resolution is a practical achievement through conversation. The position of the participants is not the same at the end of the sequence as it was at the beginning. Something has happened. What happened is the product of smaller-scale sequences which particular people, occupying particular positions, performed in particular ways that have a particular power over future sequences. However this improvisational process which creates—in the full sense of the term—a unique event is fully controlled by "what-is-always-already-there," namely the set of definitions and rules of relationship which organize who can do what, when, how, and with what kind of effect. This regulation is cybernetic in that it is controlled

by the feedback which each participant receives as he makes a move, utters some words in conversation, and performs an act.[8]

Schematically, the analysis we are sketching here moves by step through a series of levels which it might be helpful to specify so as to make clear what we mean by an activity being "an issue" that is "highlighted" through the "institutional consequences" it may have.

1. Take a short behavioral string, e.g., "Mrs. Farrell proceeds to read the small print on the label."
2. Determine the properties of the conversation within which the string is embedded, e.g., "finding the right medicine for a baby."
3. Investigate the properties of the conversations within which the particular conversation we first observed might itself be embedded, e.g., "times when one can take care of medical emergencies without calling doctors," "loving motherhood," and so on.

The behavioral strings (words and other actions) at each level use strings of the lower level as a token of what they are themselves about. Like the message "this is play," or "this is a joke" (or "this is an example in scholarly paper". . .), each next higher level conversation frames a particular utterance and gives it a particular weight; if this is a joke, then we should laugh, and thus laughter, or the absence of laughter, is at issue. If this is curing-your-ailing-child, then the child should get cured. What is *not* at issue if the frame is "curing-your-ailing-child" is the relative fluent quality of your reading. No such conversation could end with an utterance like "Good! You get an A for being able to read the label. Now, let's do some math." This is what we mean when we say that formal competence is not at issue in the family, except of course at special times, like homework which we investigate presently.

Our focus on all behavior as relational should serve as an introduction to our concern for differentiating the structural from the indeterminate in familial literacy. Clearly, the eye infection is not something that can be handled asocially. In a family like the Farrells a large number of people must be involved. But even in more isolated conditions, we would see that it takes many people, and many conversations, to deal with something like an infection. In any event, the Farrells must deal with each other. They must deal with experts. They must deal with a drug company. With each other and with the experts, they communicate essentially through oral conversations. It is with the drug company that their exchange is purely literate, but the reading of the label is only a part of a wider sequence. It is not the focus of the sequence.

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[8] The reference to cybernetics is a reference to Bateson (1972) and his approach to communication processes. Our work is a development of the ethnomethodological tradition as it is best represented by Garfinkel (1967) and those who have worked on natural conversation: Pittenger, Hockett, and Danehy (1960), Scheflen (1973), Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson (1974). Finally, our interest in the uncertainty inherent in the structuring of conversations in real time is triggered by our reading of Bakhtin (1981).

It is difficult to know how to understand this practical literacy. It is so embedded within other activities as to appear irrelevant to the main issues that interest us, the issues of "success" as measured by status mobility and the more principled issues of liberal "self-education" and radical "critical consciousness." The apparent ability to read the switch on a machine, a label on a tube of medicine, the New York Post, an announcement from school, an item on the familial bulletin board, or the legend behind a snapshot seems such a low level matter as to be outside what we need to understand.

We think otherwise. It is not that, on some abstract scale, such literacy is "important." It is rather that such literacy is a systemic part of the life of the families. It is sufficient familial literacy, but it is not the only literacy they have at their disposal. If we continued the "level" analysis introduced earlier, we would come to a set of conversations in which it would be relevant that the passing familial literacy about which we have been talking is *not* other kinds of literacy. This paper is such a conversation but the participants themselves, in certain interviews specifically framed by the interviewer as interviews "about" literacy, reveal that they had a certain awareness that there may be multiple literacies to which one may orient. The description of the other kinds of literacy systematically organized by other parts of life within the community remains one of our long-range goals; without such a description no-one can easily make statements about the acquisition of literacy by particular children or groups of children in school.

SPECIAL LITERACY

Let us look again briefly at the eye ointment episode. How do the participants use literacy in this conversation? Initially, it looks as if they were involved in a search for information. This may be the way they would talk about the turn to the label. But such a common sense statement would rob the moment of a special character. At one level, *all* the moves in the conversation could be understood as information-gathering strategies. While the overall task was the curing of the baby, the means were an examination of all available information so as not to have to visit the pediatrician, an expensive proposition which, hopefully, would not have to be resorted to. If we look at the impact of various moves over later moves, we may recognize that the information gained through reading the label has a different force than information gained through oral inquiry from one's peers. The label has an "interrupt" value. It stops the conversation, it decenters the personal experience of the participants, it redirects their search towards the expert (the pharmacist) who, himself, refers back to the literate text.

The fact that some information is "printed" is not what gives it a special character. It is important that the printing is not seen as being generated by the people themselves. It comes from somewhere else, from a realm of "experts" who speak to the ignorant in a special voice, using a special medium, a special syntax, special words, that is, a special, symbolically-marked rhetoric. The practice of literacy, in this perspective, is less a function of a special individual competence (which must, of course, also exist), but a moment in a social exchange. The drug company "speaks" to the Farrells. They "listen" to it. However indirectly, they are in relationship with the company. This relationship is structured in the sense that it is differentiated from the other relationships that they have with other people and institutions.

We want to go even further. The special character of medical literacy is something that the Farrells, the Kinneys, and the rest of us also, *personally perform*.

Although the Farrells could not easily produce a text that would look like a label on a tube of medicine, such a text—if they knew that it had been produced by someone like them—would not have the weight a text produced by the proper kinds of person would have; still it is imperative that they, themselves, move their conversations towards the reading of the label and then redirect their investigation to the expert who can give the last word. This giving of the last word to such experts in specific circumstances is something that the Farrells actually and practically do. Such literacy has a "sacred" character. The recourse to literacy is differentiated in its communicative note from the recourse to oral confirmation. Literacy is *special*, even when it is embedded within larger sequences. Literacy is expert. It cancels the oral. It takes the family outside of itself even though it is performed *by* the family.[9]

This remark will carry its full weight when we begin investigating the place of school literacy in the family's conversations. Yielding to the practical power of medical literacy is not something that individual family members, singly, see themselves doing. It is not something that one could easily change. Personal awareness of it as an inappropriate dependency, for example, would not lessen the *potential power* of this kind of medical literacy on further interactions. Medical literacy acquires its readers and doles out expertise almost regardless of the participants or their opinions. In our terms, medicine is an issue whenever human beings are ailing within the reach of our society. That the same can be said for school literacy offers us an important background against which to understand its social patterning.

HOMEWORK AND SCHOOL LITERACY

Familial, medical, and school literacies are three quite distinct social events. They are not simply different because they are produced by different collectivities of people ("family members," "medical personnel," or "teachers"). Rather fathers, mothers, and children can themselves practically produce, within their own conversations, the special symbolic acts that mark a performance as relevant to family, medicine, or education.

[9] A full analysis of the incident would investigate the role of oral conversation with the pharmacist and its own interrupt function. The Farrells' recourse to the pharmacist suggests that they do not trust their collective reading of the label. In a certain way, not only are they not competent to write the label, they are not absolutely competent to read it either in its contextual relevance. In other words, while all the participants in the scene, including perhaps Sheila, could "read" the label to satisfy the school, none had the power to "read" the label to cure a baby, which suggests the existence of a hierarchy of literacies and, through it, of a hierarchy of readers.

We only have room here to sketch an analysis and to offer a summary statement of its relevance. As part of the data collection, we videotaped the Farrells and the Kinneys as they performed for us "homework." In both cases the actual event which we taped was unique, if only because we were there with our machinery. Although both fieldworkers felt that what had been captured was somehow representative of their respective family's usual evening round, we prefer to treat the homework performances precisely *as* dramatic performances. Our analysis is not based on replication. We are not trying to answer the question of whether they do the same thing every night. We are taking up instead the question of how family members can put together a school literacy event. When called on by the local university to play school, more particularly to have the world watch them display their best homework performances, what do the families have to work with? What is the script they rely upon? Who are the *dramatis personae?* What will allow the intended audience to recognize them? These are the questions that drive us.

The taping was done is each case in the location where Sheila and Joe usually did their homework. The people involved (except for the fieldworkers) are the people who are "usually" involved, that is, they are the kind of people who "can" be involved (even though it is certain that all of them are not always actually so involved). In Sheila's case, this means that many people come within range when she does "her" homework: mother, father, sister, aunt with boyfriend, television, and so on. This list could be longer; the kitchen table where homework is done and the couch where it is checked are at the center of the Farrells' social network. Fewer people get involved in Joe Kinney's homework. This does not mean that he and his mother are by themselves: the sister, the grandmother, some friends and neighbors all have to be dealt with (not to mention, again, the television). From all accounts (the tapes, the fieldworkers' observations, interviews, and our general knowledge of homework in American families), homework is never an event that is radically separated from the family's life. There must be a careful involvement of the family and its social environment even to achieve what most people think of as homework, namely, times during which children do their homework "by themselves," "with no distractions." The very separation of the child is a social construction.

The often assumed separation of children from their families during homework highlights the social complexity of the homework performance. While the separation of the child is a social construction, it is so organized as to make society disappear. The appropriate dramatic representation of this separation must involve the creation of an empty physical space around the child, an absence of face-to-face interaction between the child and others during a certain time, a narrow focus by the child on a specific task, and so on. As performed, such moments are difficult to capture cinematographically in their social aspects. So we focused our analysis on the time when the parents "checked" the homework. This is a subroutine within the general definition of what homework is all about by being put in certain positions within the sequence. Teachers and schools disagree on the value of such "checking" and parents do not have much specific guidance about what it should consist of. Nonetheless, it is dealt with structurally as a "special"

moment within the overall routine of the day. Separation and noninterruption are again at issue, but it is now the separation of the adult-child dyad rather than that of just the child.

In our families, dramatic separation was difficult to achieve. On the day we taped, Sheila did spend a half-hour "by herself" at the kitchen table. She was surrounded by much familial interaction, but she remained on its fringes. Similarly, Joe's sister was observed regularly doing her homework by herself. Joe, however, seems rarely to have been allowed this moment of solitude. His mother told us that if she (or her own mother) did not actively participate, Joe would not concentrate. In both families, the checking sequence was difficult to arrange. The successful separation of an adult from family life is almost impossible when that adult is the center of a large household (as Mrs. Farrell is) or when the adult is the only adult in the household (as Mrs. Kinney is).

While fully appropriate dramatic separation could not be achieved, the families did hold themselves accountable for it. They performed the structural markers of separation. The many people who entered the homework scene did it as either "help" or "distraction." But the homework always remained the homework *of the child* in every participant's speech. The Farrells, as they say it, do not do "their" homework: Sheila does *hers*. By now, this should cease being an obvious point. Strictly speaking, *everyone* in the family is doing homework. Sheila, however, is redundantly marked as being the focus by being put in certain positions within the sequence.

This becomes clearer if we think again of doing homework as a conversation among a great number of people for a long period of time. Thus, it is because Sheila is in school that the family must do homework. Without her-in-conversation-with-a-teacher, there would be no homework. In other words, the family does not generate homework. This was graphically represented to us when it so happened that the day we were to videotape Joe Kinney, the teacher, "for the first time in years" as we were told, had not "given" homework. As the kind of outsiders we were, we had the authority to ask the family to do make-believe homework, which they did. But it is clear that no homework would have been done that night had we not been there.

The presence of school in the family kitchen is apparent in the way members spotlight the child's performance. Even more striking is the fact that the specific talk that is generated as part of the homework scene is structured, as school talk is structured, to isolate individual competence displays. Such conversations follow a canonical progression that is the same as the sequences which represent the school to itself[10]: mother asks

[10] Here, as elsewhere in the paper, we are distinguishing between, on the one hand, the ensemble of the activities which can be performed in a certain settings among various people and, on the other hand the symbols that (a) define the setting as a certain type of setting and (b) define the subactivities which can be performed with the setting. Thus, within a "family" there are certain activities which are particularly "family-like" in that they are used as representation of the family as a special place within the possible places in the culture. "Loving" activities probably are such activities (Schneider, 1980). Within such settings, scenes like "homework" are themselves structurally differentiated. In school too, certain activities can be used to symbolize The School even though these activities are not all those that are actually performed there

question, child answers, mother evaluates. This is a structure of the general form /Question-Answer- Evaluation/.[11] This canonical sequence can be performed in various ways. The evaluation can be dropped when the child is "right" and when a specific sequence is to be followed immediately by another. In all cases the sequence becomes more complex if the evaluation is negative. The child may question the mother's evaluation. The mother may simply reinstate the question or may give various kinds of hints. She may move on to a full "teaching" mode, restating a general rule, explaining how it applies, checking for an understanding of the principle, and so on. In any event, the position that the mother and child occupy are always asymmetrical; they cannot be exchanged. The child is the one who is accountable for the answer. The mother may check the answer in the book if she is not sure, but the child may not.[12]

The canonical progression can be thought of as a structure for a particular type of conversation where the conversational labor is divided differentially. What is particularly interesting about it is the way in which various sequences hierarchically nest into each other. In Figure 1 we offer a partial snapshot of the activities in terms of which we can begin to situate any moment of the homework situation.

The easy recognition and near ubiquity of application of our chart to homework scenes throughout the culture suggest that it captures many of the constraints on families when school comes home. Although family members have to perform the appropriate markers that constitute homework tasks as having been performed, the structural uniformity of the scenes indicates that the participants have little control over its organization. Whatever the families may think of the school, whatever the success of their children, whatever, indeed, the success of the families, all of them are accountable to the school and they behave accordingly. In other words, we have no evidence to suggest that there is any major gap between the family and the school on the subject of homework and, indeed, the structuring of education as a social interaction. They can fully participate in it.

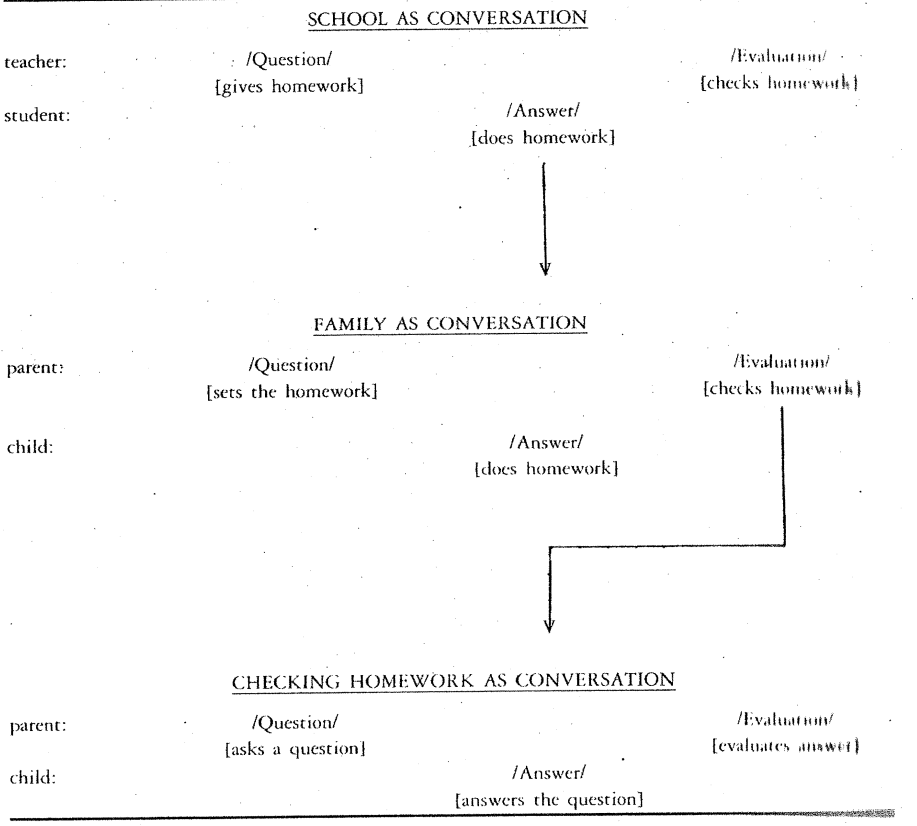
VARIATIONS IN THE DOING OF SCHOOL AT HOME

The performance of the structural features which allow the family to recognize whether or not it is performing "homework" never prevents the joint performance of other features that can mark other structures. The family can be "itself" at the same time that it is "doing homework" in a traditional manner. Families are "free" to improvise around

[11] Mehan (1978). The conventions used here are the same as those used in Varenne (1983). They are derived from those used in structural linguistics to distinguish significant units in a system (/x/) and their realization in a particular context ([x]).

[12] This does not mean that the mother is not herself on the hot seat. Particularly in front of strangers, she can demonstrate embarrassment at both her own and her child's mistakes. We have a few cases of such demonstrations of embarrassment on our tapes and the literature is replete with accounts of the way parents are made responsible for the school failure of their children. These parents were aware of the extent to which they were on the spot. They knew they could be blamed for the failure of their children.

Figure 1. Structural Replication of the School at Home



the imposed theme particularly as it concerns the insertion of the school sequences within the families' own organization. In our main report, we deal with these variations in the doing of school under five main subheadings:

1. External sequencing (how the homework is organized with the other activities of the family).
2. Internal sequencing (how the various subroutines within the homework are organized).
3. The organization of intrusions (how the entry of nonhomework tasks are managed).
4. The identification of the participants during the sequence (what the participants imply about each other as they behave during the sequence).
5. The meta-identification of the participants (how the participants talk about each other in general texts outside of the sequence).

Given the limited space we have available here, we deal only with the first three subheadings. This is enough to suggest the direction of our analysis.

External Sequencing

The Farrells. It is typical for Sheila to do her homework immediately upon her return from school. It is also typical for her mother to check it immediately after. There is no need for much prompting on the parents' part. Nobody is assigned to help her. Other participants are engaged in other activities. Even at the time of "checking" we still have all the participants engaged in a multitude of activities, but the performance of these other activities does not seem to slow down the homework process.

The Kinneys. Homework, for Joe, is typically a two-stage affair. On most days, Joe first sits down to begin his homework under the supervision of his grandmother. According to all reports, this first stage is characterized by (a) a struggle between Joe and his grandmother about the need to perform the homework rather than to go out and play; and (b) the tendency of the grandmother to do parts of the homework for him, "sometimes in her own handrwiting," as Joe's mother told us. Joe generally wins this struggle and sets the scene for the second stage of the homework saga. After Joe and his mother return home, Mrs. Kinney begins to check what Joe had to do, and what he still has to do. This may last til late in the evening. The length of the procedure is partially the product of the fact that Mrs. Kinney, at the same time that she checks Joe's homework, must also prepare and eat her own meal, keep track of her daughter's activities, catch up with the children about their day, touch base with other members of her network, and so on.

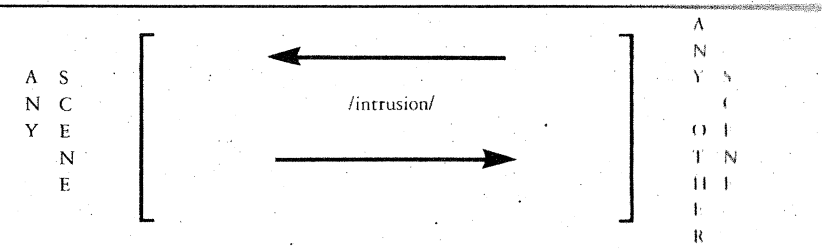
Internal Sequencing

When we introduced the summary structural model of the homework conversation as a "special" event, we suggested that certain variations could be made on it. Obviously, these variations cannot modify the basic form of the conversation. It is possible, however, to expand the form. At one extreme, the family can initiate the homework sequence by insisting that the child does homework-like tasks even in the absence of school-initiated homework (as the Kinneys found themselves doing when we came to videotape them). It is also possible to do more than just "check" and acknowledge the mere act of having done the work. It is possible to evaluate it, something that both families did; they were interested in the child "getting it right." This evaluation itself can be varied. In particular, it is possible to go beyond pure "red-pencil" type evaluation into a full teaching sequence during which the child is made to rehearse the broken rule. Mrs. Farrell, for example, regularly asked Sheila questions that were less intended as right/wrong answers than they were intended to lead to the finding of the "right" answer. This variation can be treated as a subsequence within the "parent-checking" sequence, one that is activated by any "wrong" answer. The Kinneys did not get themselves into such subsequences.

Intrusions

Both the Farrells and the Kinneys cannot totally segment homework from other family activities even as they perform the markers that make homework "special" within these

Figure 2.



activities. This is a general fact of social life. Even the most specialized activities have to maintain their borders against each other. It is not just that a social group can perform several differentiated activities concurrently. It is also that the participants must somehow handle the motion back and forth from one activity to the other and that we can learn much by focusing on how they do it. Activities "intrude" on each other, so to speak. This situation may be diagrammed as in Figure 2.

To the extent that intrusions are concretely performed, social groups will organize this performance differently. Indeed, it is around the issue of the structuring of intrusions that the Farrells and the Kinneys can be differentiated the most sharply

The Farrells. In the scene which we use to demonstrate the peculiar style the Farrells use to deal with intrusions, we have Mr. and Mrs. Farrell, Sheila and the baby all checking Sheila's homework. The television, while passive, is on most of the time. "Watching television" is a differentiated activity and it is a possible source of intrusions. We can see Mrs. Farrell and Sheila following what is happening as they lift their head from the workbook and stare at the screen. However, and typically, this moment only occurs when whoever is doing it is not "on" in the homework conversation. Neither Mrs. Farrell nor Sheila watch the tube "in place of" doing what they were supposed "to do next" as far has homework is concerned; they watch only when they are not on immediate call (i.e., Mrs. Farrell watches when Sheila is answering, Sheila watches when her mother is reading in the workbook). Even the baby can be seen following the alternating focus between homework, television, and conversation.[13] For example, after it has been established that Sheila actually can do a little exercise in which she first made a mistake, she and her mother enter into a quick sequence of moves that can best be described, metaphorically, as the dance of a loving mother proudly reprimanding her daughter for a self-assurance and satisfaction that both know is grounded. The baby follows it carefully and, when it ends, turns to Sheila and laughs with her. Sheila re-

[13] That a sixteen-month-old baby should participate in displaying the attentional structure of her family is not mysterious. It belongs with the capacity very young children have of producing intonationally proper "sentences" and conversational routines before they begin speaking in the more usual sense (M. C. Bateson, 1975). Similarly children position themselves relationally to reading long before they can actually decipher words (Taylor, 1983).

rocates and sings to the baby. In the meantime, the mother has returned to the homework; even self-congratulation does not break the rhythm. Homework is maintained until its school-defined end, that is, until all the assigned exercises have been checked.

The Kinneys. The Kinneys also must perform the special markers of "homework," and they too must deal with nonhomework intrusions into the special performance. Food must be prepared and consumed. The telephone must be answered. Of such things is modern life made. The Farrells have taught us that such intrusions, *in themselves,* need not fully "interrupt" the flow of any special activity. Interruptions are *made* by the family. Watching the Kinneys do their homework we see, for example, Mrs. Kinney, time and time again, ask Joe questions which he does not answer. She does not react to this silence. It is as if she had asked the question in such a way as to tell Joe that it did not count. Time and time again, we see Mrs. Kinney start a sequence, get Joe involved, and then abruptly drop it so that it does not develop. Quite often, there appears to be a clear external cause to the interruption. For example, Mrs. Kinney asks a question, and then the telephone rings. She answers it. What would seem more natural than that she would forget what her question was? But it is on the subtler events that we rely in our argument that, perhaps, it is not quite "natural" for Mrs. Kinney not to complete sequences which she started. In contrast to members of the Farrell family who seemed always in tune with Sheila's homework, we see Mrs. Kinney and Joe often out of tune. When she notices his lack of attention to homework, it is often just at the moment when we see him already turning back to his work. They are often hung between two activities in such a way that marks both as having been an "interruption" of the other.

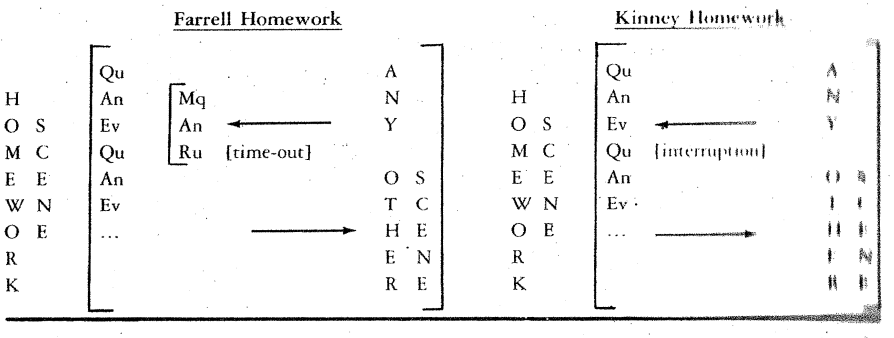
Summary of Intrusions. In abstract terms, our argument is that "intrusions" are "empty" structures that gain their specific values only as a social group produces its own history. The following diagrams portrays the differential realization of "intrusions" as either "time-outs" in the Farrell house and as "interruptions" in the Kinney family. The difference between the two families is further emphasized by the presence of the teaching subroutine among the Farrells when the mother questions Sheila about the rule that she is supposed to be applying ("meta-questioning": "Mq"), and then supplies this rule if Sheila cannot produce it ("statement of rule": "Ru"), see Figure 3.

These are obviously not the only two ways of structuring intrusions. Furthermore, what ends up constituting the family in its (sub-)cultural specificity is the ensemble of the ways in which it has transformed what is given to it.

HOMEWORK IN THE ORGANIZATION OF FAMILY LIFE

The preceeding analyses may seem to have taken us far from the more general issue of understanding how families participate in reproducing their own literacy, and through this, the literacy of the whole society. But the interactional details protect us from focusing on Joe or even his mother as the cause of his problem; the details call for an account of the connections between homework moments and the rest of the sequences that make up the culture. For example, given that Joe's sister is doing alright, we

Figure 3



might easily blame him for being, after all, "slow." Or we might blame his mother for not being able to organize an environment where he might blossom. But we feel that none of these diagnoses of the source of the trouble would provide an understanding of why it is that these matters of success and failure are in fact so important. Nor could we understand how they are performed, in the linear temporality of improvised everyday life. Even if Joe were dumb, he would still have to act dumb repeatedly, over many scenes, over a period of time. Even if his dumbness is only apparent and is the "product" of his relation with his mother (or with his teacher, father, sister, or with any combination of these), this production is not a single event that happened once mechanistically in Joe's history. It is something that must still be going on as it is constantly re-produced. In other words, it is not that, once upon a time, Mrs. Kinney did something to Joe which caused him to be slow. It is rather that, in history, a structure has developed that makes Joe redundantly act slowly. This structure is not Joe's personality, but it is not independent of him either. Like Joe, the structure is constantly on the verge of radical transformation.[14]

As we proceed in this analysis of stability-in-reproduction, we get back to an essentially "structuralist" position (in the "French" sense of structuralism). This structuralism is, however, carefully rephrased to take into account the ethnomethodological insights into the processual aspects of lived structures.[15] Doing

[14] Bakhtin's (1981) insistence on the centrifugal power of what is now referred to as "natural conversation" is something which we take to heart. No conversation is simply a mechanical "realization" of a structure. It is also a struggle with this structure. For a related insight, see Bourdieu (1977).

[15] While Saussure is mainly remembered these days as the straw linguist to criticize for statism and ignorance of the social aspects of language use, it should be noted that he specifically searched for a linguistics that was sociological. As for the issue of change, it should be noted that Saussure developed his structuralism as a method to understand his observations of linguistic change. His general statement about the epistemological status of "synchronic laws" (patterns or structures in our jargon) is particularly apt: "The synchronic law is general but not imperative. Doubtless it is imposed on individuals by the weight of collective usage . . . but here I do not have in mind an obligation on the part of speakers. I mean that, *in language,* no force guarantees the maintenance of a regularity established on some point. . . . The arrangement is precarious precisely because it is not imperative" (Saussure, 1966, p. 92, author's emphasis).

Conversely, while some who claim to belong to the ethnomethodological tradition specifically refute structuralist analyses, it has been emphasized that the work of Garfinkel (1967), for example, is in fact profoundly structuralist (Gonos, 1977).

homework is something that one has to create from scratch every day, in every sequence, subsequence, and utterance. The script itself is always loose, and it changes from night to night and from year to year. The performance is always an improvisation. Furthermore, as we showed at length, the script allows for a certain amount of freedom so that families can imprint their own style upon it. It is clear, however, that there is a script, a theme that is imposed. However fancy the improvisations can be, it is necessary constantly to come back to the theme.

We now want to focus on the constraints that define the themes. The most significant ones are, of course, those which we identified in our analysis of what it is that the families do not control. Let us now look at these constraints from the point of view of their historical development. In the initial analysis, we defined the interactional structures which could be realized in many different ways without transforming the significance of the units. Given the extreme variation in form which homework could take, it would seem difficult to recognize an utterance as "homework" if we did not already know that it was homework.

The fundamental embeddedness of all behavior in contexts is a central property of what we are dealing with and needs to be recognized so that we can understand some of the more difficult consequences which interest us. While a full discussion would take us too far, we want to mention that any single utterance (e.g., "what time is it?" or "it's ten o'clock") only gains contextual sense when it is placed within an ensemble of other utterances (e.g., "time to go!" or "good work, Joe!") which mark it as belonging to different frames (e.g. everyday life, or elementary school).[16]

In real life, the signifying contexts are "always-already-there." Only in logic textbooks does one encounter single, unambiguous utterances. The contexts are predefined by cues that are either being performed or have been previously performed with a clear marking to the effect that the context established is valid for all further utterances until notice is given that the scene is ended. Thus, in a scene originally marked as "homework," any utterance, or sequence, will be interpreted as homework, whether it is complete or not, whether it takes the canonical form or not. All this may appear confusing in such an account as this one, but would rarely be so confusing in real life. There, we always operate in terms of what has been called a "principle of cooperation."[17] The principle could also be understood as the principle of "Assumed Coherence" which could be stated as: "all statements (including silence) are to be assumed to make sense in terms of some context (within a set of contexts) which either has been predefined or is introduced by the statement itself."

Homework, then, while it is continually being produced, is also an overarching structure which transforms anything that happens within its purported boundaries into homework (as either homework per se, or time-outs, or interruptions within it). Homework, in ths perspective is not so much characterized by what actually happens within it

[16] For the general point, see McDermott and Tylbor (1983). See also Bateson (1955) on the analytic implications of the message "this is play."

[17] Grice (1975, 1978). Garfinkel's (1967) experiments with trust and the routine grounds of everyday life make many of the same points.

at any one time but rather by what differentiates it from the other activities which a family also enters in either before, after, or in parallel with it. It is only if we understand that this character of homework as a scene which is controlled down to the briefest utterances by an external set of features which establishes a coherence system for the interpretation of these utterances that we can understand the problems that confront our families, particularly the problem of failure.

THE COHERENCE OF FAILURE

Our analysis of the external features of homework which families do not control can be summarized in a statement to the effect that "homework" is a scene in which the knowledge particular individuals have of a topic is evaluated by someone else. Evaluation is a central aspect of homework. It is what makes it like school. School evaluation is the focused determination of the presence or absence of a piece of "knowledge." In other words, failure is a central possibility within evaluation. It is enough to remember that, in the canonical sequence /Question-Answer-Evaluation/, the Evaluation can be realized regularly as either "Right" or "Wrong." In fact it is the possibility of "Wrong" as a realization of Evaluation that makes tests necessary. Failure is the central condition of evaluation *even when one is doing well*. If failure were not possible, there would be no need for evaluation. And vice versa. To produce a statement that leads to another one to the effect that the first one was "wrong" is eminently coherent. Only exceptional persons are expected to "get it right" all the time. It is normal to get it wrong. In this sense, failure is not an interactional "problem." It is part of the normal, possible, progression of the scene. Finally, evaluation implies a "someone else" who controls it. And it implies an institutional framework within which it makes sense for more people to evaluate others on narrowly specified criteria.

But failure is, also, a massive problem of a different kind for the participants. It is, for all concerned, a-normal-event-that-should-not-happen-to-any-particular-person (it should only happen to somebody else). All concerned know that failure has massive consequences both in social and personal terms. It is in the great interest of the individuals directly concerned not to fail. To fail is to prove oneself dumb. It is to ensure a life history at the lowest rungs of the society. It is not surprising that individuals and their families should struggle. We saw how the Kinneys struggled. The problem is for us to understand how it is that the Kinneys, in spite of their constant struggles, in spite of the fact that they knew exactly what school expected of them and could perform, continued to produce something that was painful for all those involved.

The Kinneys, it will be remembered, receive feedback around homework from two sources. First, they suffer while doing homework. Second, they suffer when they find out what is the school's official evaluation of their homework: Joe is remaining below grade level. We could imagine that this should be enough to signal to them that they are doing something wrong and that they should change their operating procedures. Mrs. Kinney is aware that something must change. She does not like what her mother is doing with Joe. She is continually involved in "improving" the procedural aspects of doing homework (getting the right pencil, writing legibly, paying attention, working

on a clean table, etc.). And yet, she has failed to engineer any improvement in Joe's relative competence. While we might have different opinions than hers as to what would make a difference in this competence, we believe that a focus on such "improvements" are not "solutions"; they are symptoms of the problem. Criticizing Mrs. Kinney's solutions and offering her others of the same order would only have the effect of underlining something which she is well aware of: she is failing homework, just as Joe is failing school. Comparing Mrs. Kinney to Mrs. Farrell would have the same effect. It would be unfair to all the Mrs. Kinneys of this world to say that she should do more of what Mrs. Farrell does (e.g., spend more of her energy rehearsing the principles of a school task rather than assuring herself that the "right" answer has been found). Her relative success would have to come at some other mother's expense: 50% of all parents will always have children below grade level as long as we define grade level as the average of the performances of all children in a grade.

The problem, for us, lies in the coherence of failure. Mrs. Kinney says of herself that she is "one who failed in school." That Joe should also fail is a cause for suffering, but it is not surprising. It is not incoherent as to what can happen to the people she knows. *It is so coherent, in fact, that she redundantly reproduces the very conditions that produce the failure.*

Let us summarize this argument as a conclusion to this paper.

We saw how, besides making failure interactionally coherent, homework also has the property of focusing this failure on the individual actions, the child first, and the supervising parent, second. If something is going wrong, it is the child that is to be "blamed." If this does not seem reasonable, the parent will be blamed. One might then blame the teacher and, perhaps, the particular school the child attends. What must be noticed is the way all these assignments of blame shift the focus away from the institution of scholastic evaluation back onto some individual unit. Thus, the Kinneys' experience of homework as a painful event does not lead to a critique of homework as such. It leads to a critique of *their own* way of doing homework. All the changes that they consider have the effect of leading them to more of what makes them suffer. Joe would like homework simply to go away—which would lead to a more radical type of failure (expulsion from the parochial school and placement in the remedial classes of a public school). Mrs. Kinney has focused on procedural matters: salvation, for her, is the more exact performance of those acts which make homework look more like homework as she believes the school wants her to do it (and as the school indeed suggests she should).

Given the spotlighting power of homework, we can understand that people should be blinded into seeing only themselves. We, as analysts, should not be so blinded. We must look at the spotlight itself, at the mechanisms that focus it, at the people who aim it and at the functions which it serves. When we do this we immediately lose sight of the individuals who seemed so important earlier. The School, as a cultural institution, that is, the system of political accountability that is imperative on *all* schools in America, is not designed to care about specific individuals except as ciphers to which scores must be attached. These scores must have the property of being high or low. They must have been attached during complex ritual sequences that are extremely well-specified. The exact performance of the ritual is the concern to which one is held ac-

countable. A failure attributed during an improper ritual does not count.[18] If the ritual is not challenged, then the failure is coherent. It is sad for the failing person, but it is "normal." In other words, *who* fails is utterly irrelevant to The School (though not necessarily to Joe's, or Sheila's teachers, or any other teachers). Someone *must* fail, but it does not have to be Joe Kinney and his mother. Should *they* suddenly become successful, nothing would change for the system. There would simply be a minor recalibration of someone else's official evaluation: *that* person would now fail.

Finally, the irrelevance of failure as an event structurally tied to particular persons (rather than to some persons in general) also suggests that the "dumbness" which scholastic evaluations somehow uncovers is itself not the total personal event that it is made to be. School-evaluated dumbness is only relevant to school-controlled tasks. If we stand outside the school, suddenly dumbness and smartness cease to be relevant categories. As the need to evaluate disappears, so does the interactional coherence of the evaluation. Outside of homework, and schooling in general, Joe Kinney is not dumb and is not treated as such. Joe, like Sheila, fully possesses the literacy that is assigned to him in the family's everyday life. But this literacy is itself irrelevant to scholastic literacy since it is not performed within the appropriate ritual sequence. Joe and his mother are also extremely competent at the cultural performance of homework: they know what to do, they know the implications and consequences. They know when to suffer and who to blame for this suffering.

They practice this knowledge every single day. It is as deep a competence as the linguistic competence which they also have. They are not alienated from the school. What they do is not different in style or intent from what the school does. Indeed, what they do is a part of the total system of which the school is itself, in fact, but a small part. Without the Kinneys, and their "failure," the school could not be what it is. And so Joe Kinney, and millions like him, "fail." And so Sheila Farrell, and millions like her, "succeed."

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[18] Think, for example, of what happens when it can be shown that an S.A.T. question has not been scored properly. It is not enough that The School control a setting for evaluations that are particularly consequential to be considered appropriate. The School is a set of acts. It is a ritual that is efficacious only if it is performed exactly.

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PART IV

Literacy Affects The Social Order