

‘Watch mi eyes’: the predicament of visual and scribal literacy choices, as explored with rural Jamaican adolescent boys

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(with much thanks to *The Jamaica Black at 'eart Boys*)

ABSTRACT *This paper examines the theme of oral cultures in a world of literacy, assessment and certification. In particular, the paper explores the oral youth culture of adolescent males in rural Jamaica at the pivotal point of their educational careers in the school term preceding their Grade Six Achievement Tests, which will determine their placement, if any, in secondary education. Using an Interactional Sociolinguistic approach (Rampton, 2001), including participant observation, close transcript analysis and a cyclical analysis dialogue with teachers and students, the paper documents boys' sense-making strategies, which in important ways by-pass scripted literacy as an effective means of learning, and, instead, concentrate on oral and visual media literacy (Cooper, 1993; Stolzhoff, 2000). The paper draws on theoretical constructs of Bakhtin (1981) to explore the consequences of discourse differences for the educational under-participation or underachievement of the youths who contributed to this study.*

Introduction: at the crossroads of literacy and culture

The interests of this paper meet at the crossroads of literacy and cultural studies in Jamaica. Bryan (1998) notes there is increased attention by Jamaica's Ministry of Education and Culture (MOEC) on literacy. Her own work has helped broaden the definition of literacy in MOEC policy from an earlier book-based one to include a 'nod', in her words, to social and life skills in the following phrase of a recent MOEC paper on literacy: 'Literacy includes critical understanding, problem solving skills and oral-aural abilities' (1998, p. 56). In a Jamaican context, what are the problem-solving skills, critical understandings, and oral and aural abilities one needs to meaningfully engage with one's community and society? This paper addresses in a specific instance the interface between the official culture of school and the popular culture at the borders of and beyond the classroom. In what ways are literacy skills, as more broadly defined, encouraged or suppressed in the classroom?

The issue of whether a broader definition of literacy is being implemented at the school level, and the network of questions within it was attended to over six months in a small rural community in the parish of St. Catherine Jamaica as part of a larger ethnographic and critical discourse analysis study on upper primary student's learning strategies and narrative structures.

This research interest is set against a background awareness of research on literacy (Michaels, 1981; Heath, 1982; Moll, 1986), which highlights children's competencies and strategies in various cultural or community settings. Participatory research with children in development work (Ennew, 1998; Johnson *et al.*, 1998) has also critically re-examined the usual power imbalances between children and adults, questioned the Western-derived notions of childhood (James & Prout, 1997; Goldman, 1998) as a basis for deciding what is 'best' for children, and sought to include children as competent partners. I take on board these same concerns in exploring the literacy landscape for these particular youth.

A Methodology for Attending to Children's Words

As Gumperz (1986) has argued, education settings are ones in which differing cultural frameworks co-exist, often without coinciding. Differences in participants' understandings and interpretations of the same activities can nevertheless remain hidden to each other. The submerged differences in how communication is intended and how it is received can create dis-empowering, dysfunctional cycles of mis-communication. Gumperz argues that these dynamics are at work in the tendency for the gap in achievement between middle and lower class students to increase rather than decrease the further along the formal schooling trajectory one looks (Gumperz, 1986, p. 51). Evans' (2001, pp. 3–4) work indicates these trends are markedly evident in Jamaican schooling. Are these dynamics, then, a factor in the regrettable literacy exam pass rates, which seem impervious to the significant investments that, nevertheless, all stakeholders continue to make?

If students borrow the literacy constructs modelled by their teachers without also borrowing the intended meanings, in what other kinds of conversation does a fuller dialogic (Bakhtin, 1981) exchange take place? What do students' sense-making strategies and choices of representation reveal about the saliency of constructs of childhood, constructs of gender and constructs of knowledge which educational and development policy makers seek to apply to them? Are their own constructs different? How can these differences be acknowledged, addressed and renegotiated?

In order to explore these questions, I draw on the conceptual understanding of social-linguistics originating with Bakhtin (1981). Bakhtin takes a different tack than either the structuralists of his time, or subsequently the post-structuralists of ours (Wertsch, 1991, p. 120). As Stam summarises the distinctiveness of his approach:

Bakhtin transcends some of the felt insufficiencies of other theoretical grids. His emphasis on the 'situated utterance' and the 'interpersonal generation of meaning' helps us avoid both the static ahistoricism of an apolitical 'value free' semiotics (Bakhtin, 1981, pp. 264–355) and the implicit hermeneutic nihilism of some post-structuralist thought. (Stam, 1989, p. 20).

Aware that words have multiple meanings and arise from previous power structures, Bakhtin is concerned with what can be made of this predicament and how most faithfully and purposefully to represent this reality, not unlike Haraway (1988). According to Bakhtin, every choice of word confronts the speaker with elements of foreignness:

The word does not exist in a neutral and impersonal language (it is not, after all, out of a dictionary that the speaker gets his words!) but rather it exists in other people's mouths, in other people's contexts, serving other people's

intentions: it is from there that one must take the word, and make it one's own. And not all words for just anyone submit equally easily to this appropriation, to this seizure and transformation into private property: many words stubbornly resist, other remain alien, sound foreign in the mouth of the one who appropriate them and who now speak them ... Language is not a neutral medium.. it is populated—overpopulated—with the intentions of others. (1981, p. 294)

Nowhere perhaps is this more true than at school (Kilgour Dowdy, 1998), particularly schools that borrow heavily from a former colonial power.

In order to explore how children borrow words, I draw on an Interactional Sociolinguistical model. As the name suggests, the method involves not only observing other's use of language, but crucially involves the researcher in interaction and dialogue with those for whom the questions, the problems and possible responses are most immediately important. Following Rampton (2001), analysis moves across a wide range of levels of organisation. The analysis involves paying attention to the discourses active in and between levels of organisation, namely the discourse within curriculum guidelines and ministry directives, the discourse, with which teacher's deliver that curriculum, and the discourses, which members of local community use to receive and respond to these official discourses. Particular attention is paid not only to words, the turn-taking between words, and the structures formed by both, but also the gesture, stance, and prosody, in which much of the meaning and purpose of the words and turn-taking is conveyed. The analysis is not an overview, attempting to keep several different settings in focus at once, rather, it is a detailed look within one setting, as Rampton puts it, 'through the worm's eye, not the bird's'.

This approach is used so as best to attend:

to the perspectives of participants who are compelled by their subordinate positions to express their commitments in ways that are indirect, off-record and relatively opaque to those in positions of dominance. (Rampton, 2001, pp. 83–107)

Before examining more closely the ways in which students negotiated the various levels of educational discourse, it is helpful to contextualise the setting of their education.

Context: perspectives exchanged in a rural Jamaican schoolyard in post-development times

The conversations related here took place in a community that diverges along small lanes from a main commuter road to Spanish Town and Kingston. It is not a deep rural setting, in Chambers (1997) sense of the word, but one can see deep rural on the next ridge, and hear its Sunday worship services and occasional street dances. Facing the other way, through the abundant growth of coffee, breadfruit, banana, cocoa and mango one can catch glimpses of the surreal bright blue of the Caribbean Sea, and occasionally the large palatial ocean liners, symbols of first world opulence, that float like mirages on the horizon's edge. The school is located directly across from the post-office. Both institutions serve as fundamental gateways to a wide Diaspora beyond the community.

Early on I became attuned to marked generational differences in attitudes towards and beliefs in the values of the development discourse symbolised by the school. On one level there is a surrounding awareness voiced in a number of different narratives that the

community survives in a post-development era. Meeks (1996) terms the condition of the declining power of the state, the two political powers and the national economy as 'hegemonic dissolution' in which the colonial oligarchy whose power and control remained remarkably stable is finally beginning to lose its grip. Older community members voiced with pride the past educational accomplishments of the school, the doctors and lawyers living abroad, now nearing retirement age. Younger community members, teachers and parents alike, were the ones to inform me that the community used to have a fairly consistent water supply, used to have a paved road that did not dissolve into rubble for miles at a stretch, used to have a library and a health clinic, used to have a functional manse and resident minister. Reduced government spending, withdrawal of aid agency support from local projects, the changing loyalties of political parties, and the after-effects of Hurricane Gilbert have all taken their toll on the community's infrastructure and thereby its sense of direction. The way out or up, of progress has lost its linear construct, has become fragmented into divergent concealed, contingent survival strategies—much more a matter of chance, and relational networks than adherence to a stream-lined modernist construct of educational advancement.

To these conditions there is an ambivalent response. As belief in the linear construct of progress has become more difficult to sustain, the relationships formed in its pursuit become strained. Teachers complain that parents spend money on their own clothes to attend a street dance rather than on educational supplies for their children. This narrative is condensed to the tropes of book and dress, which have only to be mentioned in passing to convey the implied criticism. Parents on the other hand complain teachers are not as dedicated or resourceful as they once were. 'They don't stick their necks out,' as they used to according to one local observer. The narratives of success that had currency, of those who successfully immigrated to Britain and saved over a lifetime working at service sector jobs, in order to afford to retire back to Jamaica in their old age, now compete with the images more youthful and recent returnees and visitors are able to project. The shiny four-by-four chrome laden vehicles are, often as not, left to speak for themselves (Gunst, 1996). Here, I am making no claim about actual numbers of migrants either to Britain or America, but the shifting prevalence of representations of such journeys. I overheard echoes of these ambivalent narratives in the boys' tendency to emulate American accents, particularly that of Walker Texas Ranger, and parody the Queen's English.

Language Use Under the Guango Tree

My interest to better understand those for whom literacy does not become operative, meant that I spent quite a bit of time with a particular group of boys whom had failed the grade four literacy tests. Subsequently they had spent one year in an intensive 'sheltered' reading programme and were now in their final year of primary school. The majority of boys of this age were in this lower stream class. As is the case across Jamaica, the gender divide widens as education progresses (Parry, 2001). Chevannes (1999) is at pains to distinguish boys' under-participation from under-achievement, but the two are intricately linked.

What I came to understand about these boys' perspective is that Standard Jamaica English (SJE) modelled on British English and the scripted literacy, which is the medium of school communication, does have value for these boys, but very little use. School hours, which take up a large part of their day, force them to negotiate with this form of literacy. However, the group of boys with whom I interacted through the course of this

study employed several strategies to minimise use of Standard Jamaican English (SJE) in written or oral forms. Their use of SJE was primarily for relational rather than cognitive reasons. In other words, they do not use Standard Jamaican English to reason or creatively communicate, but rather as a means to avoid confrontation with authorities—to ring fence their autonomy by as minimal a show of compliancy as they quite adeptly assess they can get away with. The language of yard, market and street is Patwa.

I do not mean to downplay the importance of SJE. Relationships are very important in a community where distribution of resources is as much to do with relational networks as it is with the rational, technical disbursement of funds from employers either in Jamaica or abroad. The kind of relationships that SJE plays a role in, however, are ones held at a distance, possible future relations, which they are asked to believe in more out of respect for their elders than based on any clear evidence. The dilemma of education's future relevance despite its immediate apparent irrelevance, as Bernstein (1977) puts it, in this Jamaican context makes particularly conflicting interpretive demands on children's sense of loyalties and identities.

The divergent pull of competing loyalties surfaced very early on in my engagement with the boys. In an early conversation, the boys who collaborated with my study most closely at first quite easily give their assent to the school motto: 'Hard Work and Education are the Key to Success'. However, in the midst of heated discussion, a more adamant portrayal is given of the more realistic means of success, the taxi and mini van business, which actually requires no literacy whatsoever given enough other more salient cultural capital.

This contest of verbal wit and manipulation of valued cultural symbols arose out of my attempt to understand the use of literacy outside the school grounds. I had asked which did they like more, learning inside or outside of school. Up until then, Jeremiah (a pseudonym I have chosen inspired by Brodber, 1988) had been very cautious in his replies, giving one-word answers to my questions with the understanding his friend, Samuel, would fill them out, acting as his interpreter. At this point several other boys from the class came to listen in on the discussion. In contrast to his earlier monosyllabic passive responses Jeremiah makes a concerted effort to disagree with his friend, persisting through five interjections, marked in the transcript, to overturn the values previously acceded to. Samuel is again in the midst of asserting that reading and writing is better as I try to understand if there is a distinction between what he likes and what he considers good:

B: But which did you like doing, which kind of learning/

Do you like doing

Jeremiah: bi- (1)

Samuel: I learn to read Jeremiah: sometime you have to fight (2)

I want to read and write Jeremiah: No miss (3)

Samuel: Read and write.

B: I'm asking what you like better, I'm not asking—

Samuel: read and write

Read and write

Read and write

Jeremiah: Sometimes yo— (4)

B: You like reading more than—

Samuel: Fighting

Jeremiah: Sometimes you have to fight (5)
 B: You scared to fight?
 Samuel: Yes miss Jeremiah: mi no scared to fight!
 Samuel: No miss, No miss
 Jeremiah: I Always ready to fight (knocks fists with an onlooker, both grin big)
 Samuel: Always ready
 B: You're always ready for fight?
 Samuel: Yes Miss
 B: Are you always ready to read?
 Samuel: Yes miss
 Jeremiah: Yes miss, always ready for everyTING!

Jeremiah has definitely scored points with the way he has been able to manoeuvre between the choices of images. He manages to give reading a subordinate value within a street credibility value system. He does so again a few minutes later, as I try to explore what the practical benefits of reading could be after school. Samuel first asserts it is exciting to read big words, but when I ask for an example of something he likes to read, he gives the name of a local folk tale, which is echoed around the group. He then begins to chant a refrain from a local, oral tale. When I ask will they read when they get out of school, Samuel asserts that he reads the bible at church and at home. Jeremiah, however, offers that he will read a magazine and then goes on to extend the image. He will sit, legs propped up on a desk, and have the leisure to read because others will be working for him. In this way he converts the act of reading into a symbol of power over others. Reading is not an instrumental means to success but an accessory to it, a status symbol. It will be these boys who will drive his cars and get no pay. At this, the bounds of interview become irrelevant, and I become superfluous, the conversation is amongst themselves as each boy asserts, it will be 'mi' who makes the others work for him.

Ezekiel: Miss, miss, me gonna go send him out to work an' he can look at the money till his eyes pop out
 he naw gonna get any! (laughter)

My persistent questions, which culminated in the above verbal sparring session, were to gain their perspective on the classroom activities I had observed. The two assets that boys depicted in the above excerpt as being most crucial for their real success, strength and cunning, are valued and learned, not within the curriculum of the formal education. Nevertheless, the school remains an arena for learning, which takes place on the periphery of the school setting. I had observed them devoting their most concentrated efforts to three different kinds of learning. In class I consistently observed their response to assignments as that of developing strategies to borrow valuable resources from each other, through stealth, collusion, coercion, or bargaining. The object of the lesson itself seemed unimportant. In the process of aiding them in assignments in my accepted role as walking dictionary, I became aware that the object rarely seemed to be absorbed or understood. What was worked at was getting as many answers as others or as similar a response, cannibalising and re-fitting whatever the topic may have been to suit the more salient local requirement of peer relationship maintenance.

As quickly as possible the boys turn this show of compliancy to one of two other pursuits. Both are arenas for learning important social skills in a dynamic network of relationships which demand critical thinking skills, one within the realm of math and applied sciences, the other in language arts. As teachers explained, the boys of the school

had their self-determined seasons. As school commenced the season at hand was marbles. A second of a teacher's inattention and the boys of the class would become immersed in the highly ordered application of geometry and physics that marbles require. The endless bouts require swift calculations of angle and spin and careful choice of strategy from a number of possible scenarios (Bilger, 2000). The schoolyard version is subdued compared to the marathon sessions carried on by older boys on the road. In these sessions, the underlying physics is over-layered by performance art. The bantering and boasting associated with dominoes is also practised and perfected in this past time. I have watched as boys from the class stand stock, absolutely, still for hours following the tensions and triumphs of the proceedings. The verbal battlefield is as important to monitor as the physical one. Should the bantering increase in intensity, boast become dare, and dare become threat, it is imperative to scoop one's own marbles up the split second before a protesting player ransoms all of them – but not too soon, lest one be seen to have unnecessarily lost one's nerve, thereby forfeiting one's place in the game.

The other pursuit is also an emulation of older males. Often carried out in sotto voice within class, it is a celebration of the poly-vocal embodied expression and imagining of Dancehall lyrics. At every level of semantic analysis, from phonetics, to syntax, to overall discourse shape, this form of expression, highly accomplished in its own right and requiring a high degree of linguistical, rhythmical and physical co-ordination, deviates from the acknowledged language of social advancement, so overtly prized. As Cooper has observed, 'The sing-song of fixed rhythmic structures conspires to obscure meaning.' However, she continues:

If you permit your ears to become attuned to this border-line sound and allow for the free-play of the intellect, then patterns of meaning cohere, and a framework of analysis of both socio-linguistics and literacy may be constructed. (1993, p. 136)

Permitting one self to switch between this free-play framework of Patwa and the more linear structures of education based discourse of SJE is precisely the thorny problem of translation that both teachers and students have difficulty negotiating.

When I press the boys as to why they so readily turn their attention from school tasks to these activities, they insist that they do so only when they're confused. My initial scepticism of this explanation had to be reassessed in light of continuing dialogue with them and further classroom participation. An excerpt from such observations will illustrate the kinds of confusion that regularly occurred.

The Classroom Island of Literacy

The teacher, Mr Noble, of this particular group of boys was aware of the changing pedagogy discourse, and the pressures to educate children for the twenty-first century. Within the physical constraints of the setting, he made a variety of different attempts to contextualise and personalise the curriculum delivery. In the lesson described below, Mr Noble is making a particular effort to encourage them to question and think critically about their surroundings. His first attempts to elicit questions meets with silence and increasing inattention. Undeterred, he persists:

Mr Noble: 'You must learn to ask yourself questions about things. You may not have been practising, but this will 'elp you. Ask yourself certain questions, and I would like to suggest some of the questions you would like to ask yourself, 'What is happening?'

He turns and writes this sentence on board, 'what causes this to happen?' As he does this, he asks the class, 'What are the 'wh' words?'

Mr Noble's activity of writing on the board signals powerfully to the class. Legs, elbows reverse their sprawl, eyes are forward. Having been asked to give a concrete response, which draws on their practice repeating grammar drills, they readily comply. The class springs into competition mode. A forest of hands shoots up. Before Mr Noble can formally call on anyone voices call out over each other amplifying and echo-ing, 'When', 'Where', 'Who', 'Why'. Mr Noble struggles to get a word in edgewise, 'Very Good!' as he writes their contributions on the board.

'All right we are going to do social studies in a while. These are some of the questions we are going to ask ourselves.' The process of handing out the government provided social studies textbooks begins. This being a primary opportunity for demonstrating one's status in the class, a fight breaks out over who distributes them. As this settles down Mr Noble attempts to draw everyone's attention back to the topic he wants to pursue. He tries to transfer the competitive energy to a contest related to the topic, 'Stand up and say what you remember from last time.' The initial response is not encouraging:

Mr Noble: 'Anybody? Joel? Naomi? Nobody remembers?'

The disbelief in his voice tacitly dares his students to prove him wrong. The boys are aware of this opportunity to compete, and finally one comes up with a contribution:

Micah: (in choppy reading voice): 'Land masses are divided into two groups, oceans and seas.'

Rather than passing judgement on this statement, Mr Noble invites the class to respond, 'did you hear him?'

However, it seems they do not hear a challenge to engage their critical faculties, but a command to evidence their continued conformity. The class dutifully repeats in choppy monotone, 'land masses are divided into two groups, oceans and seas,' word for word with calm dutiful acceptance. After all, what Micah has offered sounds likely enough, delivered in SJE. Mr Noble himself does not betray any surprise at this statement of fact, rather, he begins to probe their acceptance, 'do you agree with that?'

The class choruses: 'Yes sir.'

How he would have dealt with this impasse, I do not know, but at this point Mr Noble hears a dissenting voice and uses it as leverage, 'All right, Ezra, repeat what you have to say.'

'Water is divided into oceans, seas and lakes,' asserts a small reedy voice.

Mr Noble puts it to the class, 'do you agree with that?'

A boy behind me calls out 'yes'. However, the rest of the class does not seem very interested in Ezra's response. Mr Noble encourages them to repeat the corrected form of the statement. He meets with very little enthusiasm and has to coax them into the drone, which they eventually produce, though fewer

voices join in. At no point does anyone seem to notice the dramatic change in the conception of the world this substitution makes. Mr Noble himself obviously thinks better of pointing this out as well. He continues towards his goal of getting them to ask questions, 'Anybody else have anything to say about oceans?'

Joel puts his hand up, 'there is land more than water.' This is directly challenged by Ezra, 'sir, there is water more than land.'

Jeremiah, in a voice more for his own benefit than as a bid to join the classroom wide conversation mumbles, 'water more than land, water more than land.' His voice trails off repeating in rhythm what could be a refrain. He does not follow the next exchange, and I wonder if, in fact, he has gone on to link it with other lyrics in his head.

There is a certain reluctance in relaying these notes. The dynamics are difficult to gauge. It is quite likely that the reader will wonder why the researcher does not see that the students' responses are tongue-in-cheek, deliberately designed to goad the teacher into exasperation. Had I not sat beside students struggling to come to grips with basic vocabulary in numerous exercises, had I not witnessed how quickly anyone who makes the slightest mistake is pounced upon with shouts of 'idyat!', a sarcastic reading might seem plausible. Such a farce would require the collusion of the entire class, requiring co-operation across lines of allegiance difficult to cross. They are in earnest and continue with similar responses until Mr Noble points out that the text book can be used to check the accuracy of the statements:

Hosea: 'The continents are called oceans.'

Micah: 'Yes sir'

Mr Noble: 'Where did you find that?'

Hosea: 'Page 31, Sir.'

(Source: Field notebook D, pp. 39–45)

View from the Teacher's Desk

It seems in this excerpt that Mr Noble is attempting in Wertsch's analysis of teacher discourse to 'up the ante' (Wertsch, 1991, p. 113). He tries to get them to mimic intermentally and then internalise intra-mentally a process of critically engaging the text, confronting it with questions. At the same time he is nudging them towards, not just Standard Jamaican English, but a particular kind of scientific vocabulary, subtly rewarding those who do. Significantly, he is asking for a response that is a generalisation, a theoretical construct. Cole (1992) as well as Wertsch (1991), argues this is one of the key conceptual shifts education is supposed to convince learners to make. However, these students do not seem to be persuaded. Instead, their response is to repeat specific instances, building up a collage of narratives or possibilities not so easily reduced. In particular Jeremiah takes phrases from the lesson, and instead of internalising their use to carry out scientific inquiry, explores their poetic and metaphorical value. Although Mr Noble does not verbally criticise their Patwa, he does not have to, they can draw on many past experiences in the school setting to interpret his more subtle signal to copy Ezra to mean they are not speaking, and by extension, thinking properly. It appears they desist from doing both.

Taking on board Gumperz' work, which shows that participants of differing status can

have differing interpretations that clash without becoming apparent, we begin to see how the dysfunctional class experience, nevertheless, perpetuates even ingrains itself. The differing understanding and uses of the discourse in this class excerpt are never overtly addressed. The situation is not dissimilar to the one Michaels (1981) examines in which African-American children have their discourse patterns ignored by middle class white teachers, or the misinterpretations that Heath's (1982) seminal work examines.

In reviewing the overall flow of this particular lesson, I am struck by the occasions when attention and energy became concentrated. Twice there were openings where Patwa descriptions broke into the discourse. When Mr Noble redirected these responses towards the text and SJE there was a dramatic drop in energy. In response Mr Noble attempted to regain their attention by offering a form of competition. This strategy gave rise to problems of its own. As the boys' desire to compete drowned out the lesson content, Mr Noble reverts to a more traditional form of classroom interaction, that of call and completion. He then uses the sense of cohesion this creates to return to his attempt to initiate questioning, or at least answering questions independently. Yet these efforts do not seem to be enough to bridge the gap. It may have to do with what he recognises as thinking on the part of the students. He seems caught between encouraging critical or creative thought, which often comes in spurts of Patwa and maintaining discourse in SJE. On the one hand he describes his attempt to get them to think:

I am trying to get them to self discover. I do so little telling because it doesn't help them. I ask so many questions and I find our children are not accustomed to being asked, they are accustomed to being TOLD! ... They are not able to write from their experience. They have such difficulty putting their thoughts into writing. I don't know if it's difficulty with language, they're just AFRAID to.

Yet, within the same conversation he tells me, 'I always insist on SJE,' while voicing his concern that of late they seem to have more trouble with it, that 'it simply is not in their brains.' The problem, I suspect, is how SJE is 'in their brains' and why they believe it is supposed to be there. Their borrowing of SJE, to use Bakhtin's term, is a very partial one. It is as if they are borrowing a shell as a hermit crab does. Bryan (2001) makes a similar observation about student's partial adoption of SJE in her research in Jamaican classrooms.

What are the tools that would help Mr Noble bridge the differences between his and his students' use of SJE? There are two bridges to be built extending in opposite directions. Mr Noble needs a bridge to the academic discourse (Bogle 1997; Bryan 1998; Pollard 1998), which increasingly engages with popular culture and language, heretofore denigrated and dismissed. He also needs a bridge to those now creating the next generation of that popular language and cultural expression, his students. This analysis is not intended as a critique of Mr Noble's individual teaching. In fact, without the commitment and clarity of purpose he demonstrates this analysis would not be possible at all.

The kinds of deep conceptual changes needed to bridge these peripheral spaces would have to address the historical fracture that exists between content and form in Jamaican society, a fracture deeply ingrained in the language and identity debates and even more deeply ingrained in survival strategies that have been reproduced and reinforced by the stark inequalities of the society from slavery to present day (Nettleford, 1970; Braithwaite, 1971; Burton, 1997; Stolzoff, 2000).

The experience of African American educators dealing with the dilemmas that the

dynamics of cultures of power throw up has bearing here, (Delpit, 1999). What is required is not a technical fix, which Ogbu and Simons (1998) as well as Wertsch (1991, pp. 146–147) have quite rightly criticised, but an opening up of dialogues about language and the power and cultural dynamics that drive and shape language differences. Bryan's recommendations seem quite apt:

(Educators) must draw on what the learners already know. The transition from one form of language to another is easier if the children are made aware of the differences and if they are given the opportunity to manipulate the sounds of the language in real but playful contexts. They need to develop metalinguistical awareness about the rhythm of language, all languages. (Bryan, 1998, p. 62)

However, as Bryan notes, given the place school holds within societal structures and its role within the development process, there are several kinds of resistance that would make a more playful approach to language no easy task. It is not encouraging that Bryan's suggestions, in fact, reiterate very similar ones made by Craig (1971, p. 379) three decades earlier.

Although Mr Noble had just returned from in-service training specifically to do with reading and language, he, most adamant of all the staff, insisted that teachers needed training in dealing with language differences and that to date he had received none. 'Something has to be done for our teachers, run some seminars, because they don't understand how to deal with this problem.' His response indicates to me that the growing academic discourse on language at University of West Indies had not been accessible or recognisable by him as useful. What are the possibilities for extending the bridge in the other direction, towards the meaning structures of his students?

Privileging the Visual over the Scribal

In stark contrast to their bland indifference to the liquid or solid state of continents, I listened as Jackie Chan's stunts in his latest movie were minutely studied and hotly contested to be 'True!' Or 'Untruth!'. They talked at length about the tricks the TV can play to make the watcher think Jackie Chan has dealt a blow. When I pressed them further about how or why they thought many action stunts were faked, they drew a parallel between what they know in life to what they see on TV:

Nehemiah: Because,
how we cyan do it
And dey can?

When I hear them making careful distinctions, reading the TV much more critically than their text books, I can't help but conclude that this says something about arenas in which they feel they have choice and can engage their thinking faculties and situations in which they cannot. Cooper has observed that, 'as anyone who has attended the cinema in predominantly oral societies like Jamaica, will attest, film is an art form, in which an open ended dialogue with the narrative/visual text is transacted,' and goes on to argue that (film) 'provides an oral equivalent of the interpreting of written literary texts' (1993, p. 96). However, the form of argument or reasoning with which the boys engage the medium of television is very different than that which is recognised and valued within the education system.

In the painstaking process of transcribing several conversations with these boys,

listening to the changes in voice, the emphasis and repetition of key responses, I realised they were arguing by image and instance, instead of making the switch to the generalisations of schooled discourse, which I was more accustomed to and sub-consciously privileging. This became evident to me in a conversation in which I try to get a feel for how they imagine the fairy tales they are often asked to read at school. Seeking to understand if in their minds they retain the European illustrations or use their own local knowledge, I ask what does Prince Charming looks like, does he, by any chance have dreads? We have been discussing Cinderella but their responses switch from the prince in this tale to the one in *Beauty and the Beast*, at a speed I at first find difficult to follow:

Samuel: Yes, im full o hair
 Daniel: Like im one Simba dey talk im
 Hosea: Dem dey kiss
 Kiss im
 De girl kiss im
 Daniel: Kiss im
 Hosea: And im get better
 Daniel: And change up
 Everyting change up!

Throughout the rest of the conversation strong images guide the flow of the conversation as they sample similar scenarios across movie genres. Their recounting of scenarios changed depending on how many had seen the film. If it is several of them, they each contribute a phrase, inserting them with perfect timing in between each other's words. The story gets filled in from several different directions, demanding that the listener open their attention out, instead of focusing it in one direction or on one voice. Neither do they begin at the beginning, but, as it were, cut to the chase, seizing on the most dramatic or larger than life images. If they dwell on a particular movie for more than a few exchanges, it is to go back and fill in what are seen as the less important images that may have come earlier in the plot, or later.

After sampling both *Cinderella* and *Beauty and the Beast*, I ask what are stories they like. They offer to tell me *Rapunzel*. In doing so one of the more reluctant speakers contributes, 'the witch stole the baby'. But once this scene is mentioned it is quickly expanded upon:

Daniel: Untrue, Rapunzel mudder and fadder ungry dem 'ungry
 and steal some some lettuce
 B: Oh right Samuel: steal some lettuce
 Daniel: And de witch say Samuel: and when dem reach witch say take
 away
 What im--
 Dem a Take away dem
 First baby dem ave first baby
 baby girl

In a community where many children are raised by grandparents or other relatives, often because their biological parents are forced by poverty and 'unger' to other parts of the island or abroad, this story touches upon emotive issues. Though it is difficult to catch on tape, what follows is two boys beginning to tell how they would resist if a witch tried to take their child. Picking up on this, I ask would you let a witch take your child. The

first response is a firm no! However they quickly work together to show me how it could happen:

B: what if the witch came to your door
 What would you do?
 Nehemiah: Hold de door! Samuel: Miss!
 Fight
 Daniel: Lick im down Samuel: Miss, we never/all right
 Samuel: all right
 Miss me asleep a bed
 say ere a bed, (motions to use room as bedroom)
 Miss, Lie down dere
 Hosea: miss dis a baby bed Samuel: a baby bed
 (from other side of room)
 Daniel: Dis a baby bed right ere so?
 And you're a bedroom dere so
 And De witch jus'
 Pull de window-

There is much within this passage that touches upon the importance and intricacy of the local relational network, but the point I wish to emphasise, is their choice of enactment as most valid form of argumentation. Without any need for Samuel to explain to them or persuade them, Hosea and Daniel join him in demonstrating for me the local reality. They even incorporate me into this strategy, telling me where my bed would be in the house.

This enactment, and perhaps the interest I demonstrate, triggers another genre switch. Briefly an account is told of a local theft. The story acts as a transition from stories recounted from fairy tale literature presented in school, to the episodes they turn to next, not of babies stolen, but of girls and young women 'stolen'.

Fairy Tale from school text	→	Folk Tale from local oral source	→	Urban Myth from visual media source
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After they have spent some time recounting these episodes from movies, I ask them what is the relationship between them and the earlier Rapunzel story. Quite patiently they emphasise that it's not a good story, it's a show. They repeat the word slowly and enunciate clearly to help me out, 'Show'. They then continue recounting adventures, moving into what they may judge to be safer territory, that of action movies. This marks a transition from depicting those who wield weapons and implements of force, to those, Jackie Chan foremost among them, who are pitted against overwhelming force. Twice more I ask what's the difference between movies and stories, is it what happens in each? Is it that Jackie Chan can do things they never read in books? Their response is to recount more of his adventures, emphasising that he comes in all kinds of shows, is not bound, perhaps, in the same way book characters are.

B: okay, okay,
 It's a good story
 But I want to know
 What's the difference between Rapunzel
 And Rush Hour Daniel: Jackie Chan
 Samuel: Rush Hour (Nehemiah makes engine noises)

B: Which do you like better?
 Nehemiah: Rush Hour Daniel: Rush Hour Samuel: Rush Hour
 B: Why?
 Daniel: Show Nehemiah: Live!
 Daniel: Like a show Nehemiah: love watch it watch it
 B: You like what you can watch better than what you read?
 Samuel: Okay watch mi eyes
 Watch mi eyes
 Daniel: mi cyan make dat distinction when mi read! whan ma read
 di show mean dan when ah read but
 Samuel: but di show di show
 B: The Jackie Chan Show is better than what you read? ...
 Samuel: you see when a watch up de show One Man Steady?
 You see in de field a big circle miss (Samuel jumps ups indicates circle
 A big circle miss with his arms)
 Jump in de middle miss
 About a tousand men, miss
 Ah right like (he pulls at friend's arms to show they come to fight)
 A Daniel come a beat im up
 A Nehemiah come a beat im up
 A Hosea come a beat im up

Here Samuel resorts to the same strategy to make me understand as they did when trying to show me how it was that a baby could be stolen from its parents, when at the beginning of the conversation we are comparing Rapunzel to real life situations. He is stressing what it is I can visually see. He walks around the circle, physically taking hold of Nehemiah's arm to help me understand that in movies they actually see things happen, whereas in books ... I am left to assume no such action takes place. When Samuel tries to get me to understand the difference, he makes a visual appeal. He asks me to watch his eyes, as if the different use of his eyes that he feels on the inside, certainly must be evident on the outside. They do something distinctly different with their eyes when they read, can't I see it in their eyes?

This makes me aware that in their struggle to attain literacy they are still at a point where engagement with words is a reduction to black marks on a white page. The transition I made somewhere in the fourth grade, in which, when I read, I no longer concentrated on the individual words but the pictures they linked to in my mind, is not one they have yet made. When I read I do see moving pictures. With the attention that Scollon (1996, p. 217) has drawn to analysing the different cultural relationships within authoring and reading, I have to wonder, is what I do when I re-imagine from written word to images significantly different than moving between visual and oral imagining as Daniel, Samuel and their friends insist they do in this passage?

Listening to them, I am reminded of Hughes' (1988) description of how stories work in the imagination. He believed that stories do become encapsulated in the most vivid images, that the image becomes a metaphor for the story, and that thus encapsulated stories take on a life of their own in a person's head, migrate or mutate into other stories, interact with them, carry out their own chemical experiments, and that this activity is the life blood of the imagination.

Pollard (1995, 1998) has drawn on Bruner's (1986) distinction between paradigmatic and narrative ways of knowing and Michaels' (1981) distinction between topic centred

and topic associative narratives to analyse Caribbean narrative styles. However, I think another distinction needs to be made between the genre of sequential narrative and the more image-based poetic structuring that seems to be in operation in these boys' recollections of movies. There are sequential steps in their retelling but the overall organisation is poetic and image- rather than process-based. Processes are indicated in the images in condensed form. Rather than this being a more rudimentary or simplistic structure, it is, in fact, more complex.

Their depiction of the argumentation/rationale of these movies is very like their performance of Dancehall lyrics. The lyrics also turn upon key images deeply embedded in everyday life, and represent a thinking and arguing by metaphor. The power of these metaphors resonates in the lives beyond the school gates:

Tell a gal you no beg
An' you no sponge
A gal ungary, cyan buy her lunch
Comin like stale crackers, loose every crunch,
Not a bag juice, much less a natural fruit punch.

As Jeremiah spends quite a while one day relating some of the lyrics to me, insisting that I spell them right, using Patwa terms not English, I point out that while we do this he speaks fluently, not like he did the other day during the interview, when he gave one word answers to my questions. Why the drastic change? He says with emphasis:

because mi 'ear it every day,
up on the road,
Mi ear it every day
In my bed ...

This is said with the same rhythmical emphasis as the lyrics he has been dictating to me, and from this assertion he slides back into them, like a diver into his element. The rapid-fire delivery of complex sequences of syllables is in stunning contrast to his monosyllabic or utterly mute responses to communicative tasks within the standard classroom framework.

His relation to scripted literacy, it needs to be emphasised, is not a result of a secluded rural environment, a throw-back, or last vestige of an oral past, but as much a consequence of his interaction with the developed modern urban centre from which Dancehall emanates, carried over radio waves and on the trucks that bring the large speaker systems out to the crossroads. When I asked them to draw what Patwa looks like, many of them drew a Dancehall stage with towering boxes of speakers.

The View from the Tree: reprise

The comments the boys offered in my final interview with them are telling. This conversation stands as an interesting commentary that contextualises both the points Bakhtin (1981) makes about the difficulty of appropriating another's words and Craig's (1971) more specific points about those difficulties in the Caribbean context. As was our custom, I requested to speak to two or three boys. The conversation begins this way, but by a slow process of attrition from the classroom and accretion around the tree, the views become not the voices of a few, but of several. In this interview, in which I am reviewing and evaluating with the boys what I think I have learned, we turn to talking about the differences between Patwa and English. Again they subscribe to the view, everything is

always better said in English. When I question this point, ‘everything?’ it comes out that, well, one can’t cuss very well in English. At this point the dialogue erupts into several voices. The standard form of interview is superseded. They initiate the utterances, laughing, and relating instances of foreigners trying to cuss and sounding silly. Similarly, they assert told stories are better in Patwa than in English. Interestingly, this corresponds to Velma Pollard’s perception of the language divide. When we spoke at Mona Campus, she stressed a related point. In describing why English exam rates show no improvement over the years, she explained that children are not exposed to SJE as a lived practical language. For instance, they simply cannot imagine English being used to make fun, or be humorous, and, given that this is a major strategy for coping in everyday Jamaican life, that’s a large part of life from which SJE is excluded (see also Pollard, 1998). It also tends to suggest SJE is excluded from other imaginative uses, like those Mr Noble suggested.

As I talk further with the boys about language differences, I ask which they think in, English or Patwa. At first they assert they always think in English, but given time to think about what I am asking, they rephrase their response. It has taken some time for them to get used to the kind of ideas I ask about. As Samuel describes, he has had to pretend, ‘fool like’, he understands what I am saying, ‘things he never heard of before’, and then go home and ask his auntie about them, a strategy, he tells me, he commonly employs to deal with Mr Noble’s instructions as well. After consideration Samuel tells me that when he speaks in English, he thinks the thought in Patwa first, then translates to English; the others readily agree.

They then make an interesting distinction. Some things they more readily think in SJE, or they associate more with SJE. Math and English they say they think in English. What about science, I ask? ‘Patwa!’ they quickly and assertively respond, voices echoing over each other to give emphasis to the response. Social Studies? ‘Patwa!’ they assert again. This response reinforces to me that when the subject is about learning the right form or formula, the medium is English, and when the subject borders upon an application to real life, the medium is Patwa. I think of all the classes that I have sat through, watching Mr Noble trying to engage the students’ interests—how at some point one of his questions asks about something from their lived experience, the upsurge in response, all in Patwa, the focussing of attention, dissipating quickly when his response to their information is, ‘is there a better way to say that?’.

As we talk further about language, Daniel says, rather mournfully, what is at the crux of the decisions they must make: ‘Miss if yu cyan read, yu cyan go nowhere in life’.

When I ask them what is good, these boys invariably give responses that affirm standards. When I ask them what they like, often they express their preference for Patwa. It is concerning for me how little overlap there is between what is good and what they genuinely like, that the category of good does not contain much that they would identify as genuinely themselves. What is left over, outside, beyond the school standard comes under the category bad, and that is increasingly the category they give themselves: bad man. Regardless of what they would choose for themselves, what their own internal sense of right and wrong, hero or bully may be, the truth of Daniel’s words hangs over their heads, indisputable. Much of what they are presented with at school they may not believe, but this they do, ‘Miss if yu cyan read, yu cyan go nowhere in life’.

I am aware that this paper has left important considerations un-addressed. The socialization of gender patterns and the frequent theme of violence and its various tropes are a few examples. My intent has been to portray that these youths’ argumentation, rather than being simpler as a result of their ‘restricted’ literacy, as Goody and Havelock

have argued (Gee, 1994), is, to the contrary, more complex. A definition of literacy that does not seriously engage with the discourse practices of Patwa is still not broad enough. As Gee suggests, the role of the English teacher is both complex and critical, involving them in ‘conflicts of values and identities’ and places them ‘at the very heart of the most crucial educational, cultural and political issues of our time’ (1994, p. 190).

I am aware that the situation I portray is not static, like an illustration but in motion like a ‘show’ and that the boys move between the discourses of school and road swiftly. Holstein and Gubrium’s apt reminder applies here. The boys’ interpretations are not fixed but rather:

emerge as provisional adaptations of diverse local resources and conditions, serving the practical needs at hand, until further notice. Culture orients and equips the process but interpretive inventiveness and serendipity intervene. (1998, p. 150)

The problem is that the practices, in the street, up on the wall, and out in the school yard, in which the boys find meaning, seem to drift further and further away from those practices for maintaining order and making development progress within the confines of the classroom. The latter practices seem on the verge of being shrugged off as shells empty of meaningful content.

My last words as I depart the field are to Daniel, the one most likely to succeed out of his lower stream class. Recognised by most of his peers as being smart, who only recently fell from grace, he is the boy who reads anything that comes into his hands, yet is one of the quickest to fight. Small and thin, he is wiry and has eyes that flash a warning before his rock solid fists connect with their message. He is the one who realises, ‘Miss if yu cyan read yu cyan go nowhere in life’. So I say to him, emphasising each word, ‘Stay In School’. Our eye contact conveys I don’t mean just today. He, however, very subtly but vigorously shakes his head, as if ridding himself of an unwanted pest, or maybe in imitation of the dreadlocked Rasta. He turns into the gates of the school, heading, however, not for the classroom, but for the group of boys at marbles under the tree.

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