SUCCESSFUL FAILURE

The School America Builds

Hervé Varenne and Ray McDermott

with Shelley Goldman, Merry Naddeo, and Rosemarie Rizzo-Tolk

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To our fathers

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1 Adam, Adam, Adam, and Adam: The Cultural Construction of a Learning Disability

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and Hervé Varenne

If maturity and development mean attunement to context, then . . . evaluation can be done only by the grandchildren of our grandchildren.

—A. L. Becker, *Writing on the Tongue* (1989)

When Adam started school he had a difficult time reading the same three-stroke "I" that made life difficult for Maxine Hong Kingston. There was no confusion with the seven-stroke Chinese character or with the demands of a culture that made "I"—every individual's very own "I"—a constant focus of conversation. Adam was born and raised in a well-to-do family. He had no trouble with America, at least in the all-important sense that he was comfortable with the details of American culture. When not reading and writing, he seemed perfectly competent in handling the minutiae of everyday life. In the first grade, he had trouble only with reading and writing. By age eight, he had been fully documented, by test after test, as having a severe Learning Disability (LD). Also by age eight, the problem was leaking into other areas of his life.

Just about the time Adam was turning nine, we gathered together the seventeen children in Adam's classroom and interviewed them for their opinions on various moral issues.[1] They were given a story about a boy who was sent to camp, couldn't swim, and was teased by the other children. They were asked if this was right or wrong. They responded with the expected options: It was not right to tease because teasing would make the boy feel bad; it was OK to tease because it would motivate him to learn to swim so well that he could return and tease everyone else. Most of the children were heard from, but Adam was silent. From teasing, our discussion

went to a second dilemma story and a third, again with Adam remaining quiet. Finally, Adam raised his hand and said, "Remember the boy who couldn't swim and everybody was teasing him. Well, they shouldn't do that, cause sometimes, if you try harder and harder, it will just get worser and worser." Not knowing how to read and write is one kind of problem; looking at life as if everything is about to get "worser and worser" is another. Adam's problem with reading was spreading to other areas of life; he was becoming a well-defined Learning Disabled child.

By the common sense of all those around him, Adam's problem seemed inherently psychological: When faced with the task of taking print from a page or writing even a simple word, his brain did not seem to work up to par. In any comparison of individuals by competence in reading and writing, Adam would perform at the bottom of his class. The verdict was unanimous: Because of a serious problem with the mental machinery he brought to the task, Adam could not learn to read or write with the speed or skill of others his age.

By the standards of this book, Adam had a cultural problem. The details differed, certainly, from the problems faced by Maxine Hong Kingston or the other students discussed in the chapters that follow, but he had a cultural problem nonetheless. He was not alone with it: His parents suffered his pain, and so did the reading specialist who seemed to inflict it, the teachers who tried to work around it, and the children in his class who grappled with understanding it or sometimes used it to soothe them in their own difficulties. Simply because others experienced his problem and responded to it, we can say that Adam's problem was cultural, and even in this weak sense of the term we could demonstrate that Adam's problem was more than a mishap in his cognitive development. But we are struggling toward a stronger sense of "culture." Culture has to do with fabrication and artifice. It has been characterized by Plath (1980) as a "parliament of prodigals" to emphasize the multiplicity of those involved in the evolution of its institutions and the florescence of what they make together. Murphy and Murphy (1974) talk about culture as of a "collective illusion," and many talk about the "arbitrariness" of cultural forms. What is sure is that the prodigal parliamentarians of America can make of LD a fact that is totally real in its consequences. We could say they collude in keeping its institutions alive even as they try, or worse precisely because they try, to alleviate the suffering of the children labeled Learning Disabled (McDermott and Tylbor 1983; McDermott and Varenne 1995). We are trying to capture this by showing how many persons struggled to develop sophisticated, replicable, and consequential ways to establish that Adam could not read. We are trying to demonstrate how sensitive Adam himself was to the cultural demand that he surrender himself as not knowing how to read (if only by attempting, for example, to escape being caught and called Learning Disabled).

Adam could not be disabled on his own. He needed others to recognize, document, and remediate a disability that had to be made "his." More important, without a culturally well-organized apparatus identifying a certain percentage of American children as officially Learning Disabled, Adam could simply have been what he was, namely, a person who learned differently or on a different schedule than others.

The term "culture" traditionally refers to concepts, symbols, and beliefs found among a people, but we insist that an adequate cultural description must show such concepts, symbols, and beliefs in use and legitimately enforced in local situations populated by real people. America was ready for Adam to be Learning Disabled.

Maxine Hong Kingston was given a complex cultural menu: Chinese, American, and Chinese American, each according to a schedule organized in great part by those around her. Adam was confronted by a related cultural menu, and one option was that he could be identified as Learning Disabled. Other options were even less kind, for example, retarded, emotionally disturbed, or brain damaged (for the social history of these terms, see Coles 1987; Sarason and Doris 1979). Since World War II, there has been an onslaught of special education designations for children in American schools, and it is Adam's fate to be acquired by one of them. In a previous generation, he might have been called stupid for his slow pace, and he would have been finished with schooling early in life. Learning Disabled may be a better label than stupid, and there is the hope that with an appropriately protective education, those called Learning Disabled might be able to stay for the full duration of school and perform, however differently or belatedly, on a par with others (Rawson 1968). This fervent hope can be no better than the cultural framework in which it both emerges and must be put into action.

Adam a generation ago, Adam now, and Adam a generation from now each encounters a quite different set of pressures and designations with which a life must be shaped. We cannot observe Adam at work in the past or the future. We cannot observe him alive in the world of poor whites in Appalachia or in an aristocratic family in England. Nonetheless, we are quite sure the seemingly biological problem that made it difficult for him to read would have had different consequences for his life in other circumstances.

Guesswork about faraway times and places aside, we were able to observe Adam in different moments of his everyday life as a student in a liberal Manhattan private school. To extend the metaphor we introduced earlier, we can say that we looked at Adam in four of the rooms he occupied: in settings around New York City unmarked for any particular activity, in a weekly after-school cooking club, in various classroom lessons, and finally, in a one-to-one testing environment. Adam's behavior varied remarkably across the four settings, and so did the behavior of those around him. Adam, we might just as well say, appeared as four different people: Adam, Adam, Adam, and Adam, as we suggest in our title. More commonsensically, we might have said that he was a single person in varying contexts. We suspect that it would be more helpful to think of him as a radical 我 who, like the rest of us, was viewed through multiple lenses, each making something different of him and thus preventing him, as 我, from ever being directly accessible. When taken together, these four versions of Adam tell us less about him than about the patterning of the diverse positions available to persons reading and writing in America. To the extent that Adam's problems with print varied with his circumstances, we can talk about the interactional organization of his disability, and to the extent that his circum-

stances were well-structured versions of each other, we can talk about the cultural organization of his disability.

Three Accounts of the House Adam Inhabits

In unmarked moments of his everyday life, Adam was quite invisible as a child with problems. If he needed information, he asked for it. If he needed to read or write, he could do a little on his own, and whether he did it well seemed to be of little concern to him or to those around him. If the task was beyond what he could do, he simply organized others to do the job; nothing seemed to lead to an evaluation of his intelligence or competence in the way such issues showed up in the more school-based settings. Adam was a great storyteller, and he was a popular raconteur in his mixed third- and fourth-grade classroom. Time spent with Adam outside of school showed only the Adam the other children adored. In addition to being the classroom bard, he was a good drummer, and he had started to use his big size to gain some respect at basketball. If he had problems learning how to read and write, they were not to be found in the daily round outside of school.

Away from everyday life, at the opposite end of a continuum of freedom and school-induced constraint, was Adam in the testing environment. We gave the children tests to learn how they performed on traditional tasks of the type used in experimental cognitive psychology. We hoped the test results would give us a base to compare how the children handled analogous tasks in more spontaneous settings, such as cooking clubs, where tasks were defined and redefined from one moment to the next in situ and without the illusion of experimental control. If psychological studies were filled with accounts of the importance of children attending, remembering, and problem solving, we should have been able to find something like those activities while the children were making cakes. To compare cooking-club thinking practices with more-controlled laboratory performances, we brought each child to a one-on-one testing environment where he or she was administered questions from IQ tests and some more interesting probes we had taken from the experimental literature.[2] Because we were too close to the children to take an objectivist stand, we hired a professional tester to administer the tasks. Most of the children did well on the tests, and many seemed to enjoy being asked to do hard things without recourse to adult help.

It was in this situation of individual child against a well-defined task that Adam most often displayed his differences. The tasks were designed to show individual differences, and they did their job well. Adam performed miserably, almost randomly, as if he were wildly guessing at answers without giving them any thought. A careful look at the videotapes indicated that he was thinking a great deal, although mostly about matters only tangentially related to the tasks presented. Mostly Adam was searching for ways to get the answer from the tester, a well-documented strategy among children expecting to get too many questions wrong when left to only their own thoughts (Cicourel 1974; Thomas et al. 1971). The tester was professionally nonreactive, but Adam would diligently wait on the tiniest cue.

One question had only two possible answers: cup or spoon. It was an easy question with a limited range of answers, and all the other children had picked the right answer. As the tester finished presenting the situation, Adam threw his head back and said "Oh! That's easy." We were relieved when we watched the tape, and even the tester reported she was looking forward to him feeling good about one task. After a closer look, it was not even clear Adam had heard the content of the question. He followed with the beginning of the wrong answer, found the smallest twitch in the behavior of the tester, and then changed his answer: "Cu-uhm-spoon." In this case, Adam primed the environment for the "right" answer. Other questions were less amenable, and the tester worked hard not to give away crucial hints. Adam struggled most painfully with the test of digit-span memory, a hallmark of Learning Disabled children, getting at most a string of four, whereas others in his class were handling six and seven digits.

There is a paradox hiding in this rather commonsense account: The formal organization of the testing session was designed to produce the most neutral and objective circumstances for Adam to reveal his true unique individual self, the culture's "objective" version of Adam's 我. Ironically, the test used the most artificial and inflexible circumstances to deliver its portrait of Adam. It was a setting that framed tightly what the two protagonists could do. Tests leave little room for negotiation, play, resistance, or transformation. Rather, any evidence of attempts to negotiate, play, resist, or transform can be taken as prima facie data for only one kind of evaluation, the specialized one for which the test situation was designed. Everything is scripted by a long tradition of professional development by culturally designated specialists: testers, counselors, social workers, and therapists who can find in almost anyone's behavior evidence of the kinds of problems they know how to look for and record in ways that still others can use (Becker, H. 1963; Cicourel and Kitsuse 1963; Wieder 1974; Pollner 1978). While Adam was in the test setting, all behavior was relevant to only one thing: the revelation of whether he was Learning Disabled. All other possibilities opened in Adam were canceled and thus, from our point of view, his 我 escaped, as it must always do in any culturally constructed attempts at capturing it.

On its own, the test setting revealed little about the full complexity of Adam's life, but it did use his behavior to highlight the specifics relevant to a cultural portrait of disability. To this extent, it is our point that the trait Learning Disabled was not his; it belonged to the test, its developers and interpreters, and the school systems that had little choice but to take it seriously.[3] Adam "borrowed" the trait or, rather, since we cannot assume that he did it willingly, Adam was acquired by those in charge of preserving the facticity of LD.

It is not enough to say we saw different Adams in the four-different settings. We must also give an account of the organization of these settings. One account is all too familiar: Everyday life is "easier" than tests, and the continuum from everyday life through clubs and classrooms to testing settings is to be understood in terms of cognitive difficulty. There are other possibilities we must explore. The continuum can also be conceived in terms of constraint, from the apparent freedom of everyday life

FIGURE 1.1
A Continuum of Settings and Three Ways of Thinking About Them

Everyday life	*After-school clubs*	*Classroom work groups*	*One-to-one tests*

Increase in cognitive difficulty,
Increase in special constraints, and/or
Increase in institutional visibility and individual vulnerability

to the specialized, artificial, strongly framed, or scripted constraints of the test setting. Finally, the continuum can also be understood in terms of institutional visibility and thus in terms of individual vulnerability to being intelligible only in terms of the setting at hand. Figure 1.1 offers a view of the continuum of settings for Adam to be Adam, Adam, Adam, and Adam and three ways of thinking about how he could have been so different across the settings. The three different ways of thinking about the continuum, namely, increase in difficulty, constraint, and vulnerability, have different implications for how we think about Adam. As the world got harder, more artificial, or socially threatening, the less well Adam performed and the more he was noticed, documented, and remediated. It makes a difference which version of the continuum one takes most seriously.

If the continuum captures cognitive difficulty, then the tasks require more mental effort and ingenuity as one moves from the ease of everyday life to the taxing questions of the psychometric test. Most psychologies of cognition are united in assuming that everyday life is simple and that it is necessary to press subjects with difficult questions to locate the structure and limits of their competencies.[4]

The continuum can capture specialized constraints in the sense that in much of everyday life, one has access to whatever can be used to get a job done, but at the other end of the continuum, on tests, one is severely limited (with classrooms and after-school clubs, depending on the moment, taking up the middle ground). In everyday life, if one needs to remember a phone number, it is possible to memorize it, work out a mnemonic, look for a pattern in the touch-tone number display, or simply look it up in the phone book; on a digit-span test, however, no aids are allowed. In everyday life, the task is to have the number when it is needed in whatever way is convenient; on a test, the task is to show off what one can do without resources, and the alternative is called cheating. Although gaining control of a seven-digit string could be an example of a cognitively well-defined task, socially, whether one does it to get done a job or simply to show off how a job might get done makes a great difference. Adam performed well in everyday life; he handled the tasks that came his way. He did not perform well when he was limited by a social script that said he had to handle the task by himself in a specific way with no help from his friends.

The continuum could also capture *social visibility* and *vulnerability* in the sense that as one moves from everyday life and after-school recreational clubs to school and diagnostic psychological tests, there is a marked increase in what can go wrong

and may even be noted legitimately in the permanent history of a person. There is a marked increase in the attention others give to the form of one's action and in the severity of the consequences such notice may trigger. It is of course possible to get things wrong in everyday life and to be laughed at to boot, but most failings last little longer than the next task to be done. It is as if the everyday world does not have time for documenting every slip, as if it is simply more important to perform the basic tasks of life than to notice how well one has performed them and then to record an evaluation for further use. Some people are better cooks, basketball players, or calligraphers than others, but there is rarely a price to pay or gain for doing these jobs badly or well—unless one is applying for a job as a cook or a basketball player. School tests, in contrast, are organized for the purpose of documenting who is doing better than whom, and a point this way or that can make for a quite different institutional biography.

The children in Adam's class noticed that there were school-relevant things he could and could not do. Sometimes they made sport of him for his shortcomings, but these difficult moments were not generally turned into barriers in his institutional life. Passing insults are not to be confused with full "status degradation ceremonies," in which a whole person is compared negatively to what an institution requires (Garfinkel 1946, 1956; Pollner 1978). A passing insult leaves fleeting memories, whereas a written, official school record leaves not enough passing children (Goldman 1982; Oakes 1987).

Not unlike many children, Adam could not say the word "spaghetti" and would instead say "pisghetti." Apparently, he was the last child in the class to make the transition. During cooking club early in the year, the kids started singing a song about foods that they liked. Adam sang along. When they got to the word "spaghetti," they all stopped while Adam, much to everyone's delight, continued to sing on with the mispronounced word; on the next chorus, Adam was sharp enough to stop when everyone else stopped, but without relief, for everyone asked him why he didn't sing the next word. Later, in the cooking club, Adam made a green cranberry bread, a possibility if one puts the ingredients in exactly the wrong order into an aluminum bowl. Everyone gathered around to laugh, but Adam confronted them directly: "So I made a goddamn mistake. So what?" Neither the mistake in singing nor the mistake in cooking kept Adam from continuing to participate in these activities.

However painful the scenes from everyday life or the after-school club might be momentarily, they paled before the struggles in more classroom and testlike environments. We watched a fifteen-minute reading workbook lesson in the classroom. Adam was asked to match pictures with words: "race" with a runner, "face" with a face, "rake" with a rake. This was a tortuous task for Adam and for anyone who dealt with him. He read "face" as "flake," a troublesome mishap. Phonics is not easy for children, even for those who already know how to read. In this case, there was the hard "c" and the soft "c," and the confusing entry of the "l." Nor was it clear that Adam understood what he was supposed to do even if he could read the word, for there are many ways to relate words to pictures. The teacher was making the rounds

among tables of focused children. Adam got her attention, and after a few minutes of instruction, Adam seemed to know what to do. The other children monitored his development carefully but worried mostly about their own work. The teacher went off to work with other children, but Adam called her back. They had to start at the beginning, but again they made headway. The teacher left again, but when she returned, Adam said, "But what's a flake?" A few minutes later, with the teacher working with someone else, he tearfully pushed his book away and said: "It's too hard." The other children watched him carefully, and he did not return to a work focus.

The work may indeed have been too hard for Adam. But what made it even harder, although not intrinsic to reading as a task, was the fact reading was used as an occasion for Adam to be made visible as a particular kind of person, the kind of person-who-fails-because-he-is-Learning-Disabled. Instead of being made visible as easy or hard for individual readers, reading could have a quite different social function. Historically, reading has often been important only to the extent it was in the service of prayer. We would not expect an LD classification to emerge in such a setting any more than we would find a classification of "singing disabled" in contemporary churches. Not so long ago, the high aristocracy of Europe was not expected to know how to read but was expected to know how to dance and, in the case of boys, how to fence (Darnton 1985). Getting things wrong while making a cake in one's kitchen or even in a cooking club is one thing; getting things wrong in school or on tests is a different matter.

What is involved in taking an ordinary problem (not reading or even not singing well) and turning it into a Disability (McDermott and Varenne 1995; Murphy, R. 1987)? How many people have to be involved, in what order, and with what long-term arrangements among them for ordinary tasks like learning to read and write to become a social problem as well? These are questions many in anthropology and sociology have been trying to answer. In successive quarters of this century, Émile Durkheim ([1897] 1951), Ruth Benedict (1934), and Claude Lévi-Strauss ([1958] 1963a) have each offered general statements that we can use. We are trying a more delicate version in the traditions of Gregory Bateson ([1936] 1958, 1972) and Harold Garfinkel (1967), a version that is sensitive to the power of the words we, as analysts, must use, words that threaten our own articulateness. We are trying to steer between two bad choices; we can make common sense by working within received categories, or we can lapse into obscurity as we try to suggest something else than the common sense. How, in other words, should we summarize our concerns with Adam? Should we write:

We want to display how Adam's Learning Disability makes a difference.

No, because this would suggest that Adam's difficulties as interpreted exist independent of his circumstances. It might be better to write:

We want to display how Adam's Learning Disability is organized to make a difference.

This is better but still may lead a reader to assume that Learning Disabilities are there to be organized before anyone comes along to identify them. We don't want to imply that Learning Disabilities aren't there, of course, only that whenever we get to see them, the institutional world that makes us look for them and find them has always preceded us to the scene. Let's try again:

We want to display how people use institutional (cultural) resources to build scenes in which Adam can be shown to be a classic case of Learning Disability.

This may be as close as we can get to a proper formulation for a book that focuses attention on resources and on people as actors making things visible. We can now proceed to look in further detail at two days of the cooking club, the day the children made banana bread and the day we, the educators and researchers, made the IQ bee. On these days, in quite different ways, as if out of nowhere but precisely not out of nowhere, as if no one could have known in advance that it would happen, Learning Disability moments were built for all to notice Adam as a problem and thus give Adam a problem he experienced keenly, as we also did. We might just as well say that *these are the moments when Learning Disability acquired Adam.*

Making Banana Bread and Other Troubles

We knew the children in Adam's class for about two months before we started the after-school clubs. Adam and seven other children were assigned to the cooking club, where in the course of making cakes and the like, we thought the children would have to read, plan, pay attention, solve problems, and remember, all in concert with each other and therefore in ways we could study. Not particularly noticeable to us in our time in the classroom or on overnight trips to the school farm, Adam came very much to our attention in the first two meetings of the club. He seemed possessed, jumped around the room, knocked over our equipment, and was, we thought, unable to focus on anything. By the third week, he calmed down, and unless we went looking to see how he was doing, we noticed him as only occasionally different. By the third week, Adam had figured out that in the cooking club, pairs of children were supposed to work together, and he took on a partner. Together, they were a perfect pair. Peter was shy and wore a baseball cap over his eyes, but he was a great reader. Adam was gregarious, ready always to do the social work necessary to getting a cup of milk from the one container that the four pairs of children had to share, but he had a difficult time with reading the recipe. Adam and Peter were constant partners in the cooking club. Peter would read the recipe, Adam would get and measure the milk, Peter would pour it into the bowls, and Adam would pick up the recipe and triumphantly read what they had accomplished.

On a few occasions, the adults designated cooking pairs, and the children resisted mightily. One day, the children gathered around the table to get started. They were in pairs of their own choosing: A with B, C with D, E with F, and G, whose partner

was ill, was by himself. We organized them differently: A with F, B with C, and so on. They protested, but we insisted on our order. They started to make their cakes but seemed to have a hard time getting organized. Fifteen minutes later, a calm came over the room. We were amazed to see that they had arranged to be back in their original order: A with B, C with D, E with F, and G working with an adult. One pair had protested loud enough to get the adult to allow a change, another pair had fought with each other enough to force the adult hand, and a third pair sent one member to the bathroom long enough to bring about a rearrangement. We didn't know what hit us. Over that fifteen minutes, the pairs made some progress cooking; each pair had one child working on the cake and one child working on the reorganization. Amazingly, at key points in the cake making, the reorganization person would suddenly attend to the cooking, and at key points in the reorganization work, the cooking person would be attentive to the social situation. Attention always ran on two tracks, the social and the one prescribed by adults. Adam and Peter divided the work a little bit differently than might a pair with two shy good readers or two outgoing nonreaders, but there was nonetheless a definite social arrangement to the work that had to get done. When Adam and Peter worked together, the social work was almost invisible, and they quietly went about their cooking. When Adam and Peter were separated, they had to rearrange both the intellectual and the social work agenda.

All work pairs of their own choosing were gendered, boys with boys and girls with girls. When we tried to mix them, Adam wound up with Dawn, who refused to work with a boy. Adam might have read the recipe on his own, but this was treacherous. Instead he neatly rearranged the situation. First, he asked Dawn for help with no results. Then he pleaded for help, again with no results. Finally he stood over her and explained that he had an allergy to butter and that it made him vomit. Dawn joined the work team, and Adam had a pathway through a potentially difficult day.

The day of the banana bread was more difficult. Adam and Peter entered the room, as they always did, arm-in-arm. We were months into the cooking club, and they had the routine down. The adult would show them how to make the bread, they would watch, and then they would do it themselves under the guidance of the ever-helpful adult. This day was different. The adult gave a quick lesson on banana bread, but no one watched. Adam and Peter played football on the side of the room before turning to the center table to make "uhm, uh, banana bread?" Peter announced that he was allergic to bananas. The adult was furious about the football game, decided not to help anyone with cooking, and went off to a corner to play a board game with Peter. Adam was left alone with the recipe.

Not because we were bad people but because we had simply photocopied a recipe and some instructions from a cookbook for banana bread, Adam faced a difficult road: The instructions were on the right side of the page, and he started with the ingredients on the left, thereby doing most things in the wrong order. This did not have to be a problem, but almost anything can become a problem in a competitive setting. We also gave the students, stupidly we realized later, a two-cup cup. In addition, for Adam, there was the added excitement of sorting out teaspoon from tablespoon and baking soda from baking powder.

Adam needed some allies. Reggie and Rikki were available. Reggie was the only other boy in the group, and he had been locked out of the Adam-Peter dyad all year. He apparently took this to be a time for revenge. Adam called the group to order: "Let's get started, wouldjya." He had the recipe in hand, up to his face. No one came forward. Adam headed to the adult for help, but Reggie interrupted with a promise of help: "Give it here." Adam returned and handed the paper to Reggie, who did not take it; instead, in typical Reggie fashion, while Adam was holding out the recipe for Reggie to read, Reggie managed to hold Adam accountable: "Well, why don't you give it to me?" This pretty much characterizes what Reggie did with Adam. He would offer help but not give it, leaving Adam dangling in need of help, and publicly so.

Adam's other candidate for help was Rikki, who had had an argument with her partner and wandered around the room for about ten minutes before they patched up their relationship enough to start their own banana bread. During those ten minutes, Rikki followed Adam around, never quite helping, never quite joining the Adam and Reggie pair but always carefully watching their progress. At one point when Adam was having a difficult time getting information about what he should be doing, Rikki followed Adam across the room to the adult, stopped suddenly, stamped her foot, and screamed for all to hear, "Oh! Why can't you read?"

Over the next ten minutes, Adam made twelve stops for help. It wasn't just that he had a hard time reading. In fact, he barely looked at the recipe long enough to read. Even if he had the right information from the page, he had problems with trusting the information. He had problems measuring 1 3/4 cups of flour, particularly with the two-cup cup, and he had problems with putting the ingredients into the bowls in a particular order. He had problems with the others around him: with the adult who didn't want to help and recommended, "Figure it out for yourself, Adam. You weren't interested in watching before"; with Reggie, who seemed to enjoy making a spectacle of Adam's problem; and with the group of girls next to him, who wanted to make a better banana bread than Adam—and faster, too.

Amazingly, while handling all these problems, Adam still found time while he was sifting the flour to engage in social banter. Helene, fresh from the argument that kept her from working with Rikki, refused to join the rest of the group; instead, she settled on the floor to play a game of cards. Adam interrupted and told her to "go make a cake." She pouted, and he responded by calling her, sing-song, "a little baby boo boo, a little baby boo boo." Helene's friend Dawn jumped in and told Adam, "You just born." Reggie joined Adam's side: "You never will be born." Dawn again: "Better not be born than to see your face." And finally Adam capped off the exchange: "You just my imagination, Dawn." With that, Adam finished the sifting—actually he called it "shifting"—and had to focus on the problem of deciding what "1 3/4 cups" might be.

It took Adam a few minutes to finish with the flour. The adult formulations about how to get a proper measurement seemed not to help him much. So he filled the

two-cup cup near to the top and returned to the adult, who then had only to point at the right line for Adam to understand. He went back to the table, singing a circus warm-up tune, and said, "Finally" as he scraped out the excess flour.

Adam's next move was lethal. In the list of ingredients, the second item after flour was yogurt. In the list of instructions, yogurt was fourth, after bananas. If Adam was ready to use the yogurt, he would have been a step ahead of Nadine's group, which was up to bananas (number three in the instructions list) and well on the way, as always, to finishing first at all costs in all categories. Adam looked around the table and said, "Where's the yogurt?" Nadine oriented immediately: "You're up to yogurt already?" He was not, of course, up to yogurt on the list of instructions, and worse, he didn't know there was a list of instructions as different from a list of ingredients. Nadine and Lucy had to set him straight, and they did it with a vengeance:

(The girls are screaming and Adam, whimpering. The double vowels in Lucy's talk are chosen to show that she is reading to Adam as one would read to a child in a phonics lesson. The scene opens with Adam returning from the adult with the sense that he knows what to do next.)

Adam: Finally! Where's the yogurt? Oh (reaches for yogurt).
Nadine: You're UP to yogurt already?
Adam: Yeah.
Nadine: Where's the bananas?
Adam: We, uhm, they didn't give us bananas yet.
Nadine: Well, go get 'em.
Adult: The bananas are here on the shelf.
Adam: But this is our second page.
Lucy: That is a teaspoon. That is a tablespoon.
Adam: This is a teaspoon, and it says . . .
Lucy: It says tablespoons, twoo taablespooons.
Adam: We're right here, Lucy. Lucy, we're right here.
Lucy:[Thatquoteright]s—
Nadine: That's the ingredients, not the instructions.
Lucy: That's baakiing powowder.
Adam: What do you mean, baking powder?
Nadine: You go in this order.
Adam: (Oh my god). What do you mean, in what order?
Nadine: Look! This is the instructions. That's what you need to do all this.
Adam: Ai yai yai. One . . . Cup . . . Mashed . . . Fresh (in a staccato mock reading).

(Everyone looks away, and Adam returns to the adult for more advice.)

Adam led a difficult life at competitive moments. He was making his banana bread against considerable odds. No one else was doing it alone, and no one else was being hassled by Reggie or actively ignored by the adult. Adam might have gotten the cake done, but the rest of the world seemed to insist on interfering.

Adam was experienced with this kind of problem. He knew how to handle it, albeit at a cost. He went looking for some help, but this time he was crying as he flopped, back first, onto the adult. He got some confirmation that he could proceed as he had planned, and because he was as much a member of the culture as Nadine, he headed back to the table claiming that he was right all along; actually he said to no one in particular, "I was right, stupid." No one responded until he tearfully yelled at Reggie, "Ah, c'mon Reggie, wouldjya?" Reggie said, "Crying?" and then softly added, "Here. I'll help you." Together they made their banana bread just as successfully as everyone else: Not a single one of them was edible.

Note the complexity of the "problems." There was the pathos of Adam crying. There was the chill produced by noticing how each individual in the room added a stone to the wall that eventually so boxed Adam he had to cry to escape it. It did not have to be this way. The construction of this particular kind of box is not driven by a human genome that organizes even little children. This box is a cultural one, and its construction is driven by a particular historical need to assert who can do certain specific things better or worse than others. Most other cultures are not organized around a needless competition of all against all, and even ruthlessly competitive cultures, contemporary Japan being a good example (Rohlen 1980, 1983), can leave the acquisition of literacy outside the competitive arena.

If nothing else, culture is relentlessly specific. Life in any culture engages participants in the technical problem of everyone learning to see coordination in the actions of many and well enough to produce and reproduce culturally identifiable scenes. The "child-who-cannot-read-tries-not-to-get-caught" and "the child-who-fails-gets-to-cry" are two such recognizable scenes. If Adam's cooking club had been a ballet, we would have marveled at its coordination. Throughout this book, we point to how exquisite such coordination can be. We also point to how seldom the coordination of everyday life scenes is appreciated by people in the culture or even by participants in the scene. In the case of Adam's cooking club, the coordination among the participants was made irrelevant to the total cultural fact that the point of the ballet was to hide itself in order to highlight the performance of one very talented or very untalented, even Learning Disabled, person.

Adam had a problem that invites pathos, and this, more than anything else perhaps, may be what ensures that future children will find themselves struggling pathetically in the same situations. His situation invites our sympathy, and such descriptions as we have just given are generally used to move readers to some action. In many ways, this is our goal too. The problem, our problem as educators of educators, lies in determining the direction of the movement. In response to the pathos of the ever increasing number of culturally well-identified failing children, a host of educational and developmental theories have evolved over the past half-century that proclaim they "focus on the needs of individual children so that they can become all they can be." This is a noble but easily misguided sentiment, and all the more so because a critique of the direction taken is often interpreted as a critique of the need to move. When we are concerned with all Adam-like children, we must never forget to worry

about the steps taken to identify them as being in need of our help or about our definitions of the "all" in "all that they can be." As we work at identifying someone as a child in need, as we develop means to help others identify him, it is easy to stop considering the actual, active, alive child who handles his problem resourcefully, even in crying. The more pathetic someone like Adam is made to be, the more people get concerned with him and the more they may efface him. In institutional America, the only tasks professionals may, indeed must, perform as professionals given specific authority by the State is to document what is wrong with Adam. This is their job and responsibility. They may, in other settings and wearing other hats, protest a world that forces them to "be" these implacable evaluators of Adam's own incompetence. At the appointed times, and even at other apparently more benign times, they must, no matter what, perform the evaluation. It took us a long time to wonder why the adult tried to motivate the cooking club by announcing that he wanted to know who could make the best banana bread without adult help. Making banana bread had become another test. But of what? Bread making? But why? Who cares?

The pathos in any Adam's situation comes from the fact that "his" problem is precisely not his. Thus any attempt at helping him with it must not focus on him. The focus must be put on the institutions that make people (organizers, fellow students, researchers) care about how well and how fast Adam is, for example, baking bread. Eventually, in fact, this Adam made the bread. He always got his job done. Others might have hidden. He always tried. He kept going. He was always willing to ask for help and to return something for the help he received. But it takes three to establish a gift exchange: two protagonists and the crowd providing them with the gifts and fixing their value.[5] On another day, when he was again on his own trying to cook something, Adam asked Helene for information. She put her arm around him and steered him away from the cooking table while saying she would help him; about four feet from the table, she used both hands to push him away from the group and said, "And don't come back!" Adam's problem was that he was performing in a world in which "competition" (a particular type of ritual drama we discuss in detail in Chapter 5) ruled. In this drama, making bread was secondary to making the better bread or making it faster. The final bread in our scenario may have been inedible, but some children nonetheless showed themselves better and some worse at it. Once again, a school-related event had generated a clear demarcation between those who could and those who could not. Adam's problem was less in his head than in the people around him. This became clear to us on a personal level when we organized the IQ bee.

Making IQs in Public

About eight months into our year of work with Adam's class, we had a growing sense of the social and institutional constraints on the cognitive lives of the children. Better phrased, we had a sense of the ritual organization of behavioral displays that forcefully pointed, through certain institutional lenses, to the cognitive skills of the various children. We thought we knew, for example, that some kids simply knew

how to look like they were learning, that others knew how to hide from getting caught not knowing something, and that still others could spend their day picking their spots and strategizing when they should take risks with the cultural currency of the classroom and when not. The cultural currency of the classroom, of course, grades children by how much they look smart or dumb. We also had a growing sense that when the children were not overwhelmed by these strategic concerns, they seemed to be much more accomplished and happier people.

We knew all this, in one way, because we had long years of experience in America. We knew it, in a different way, because we had been watching the children situate themselves in relation to the gains and losses that come with life in an American classroom. But there was also a way in which we did not at all understand the pressures on the children, so much so that we organized a competitive setting that gave Adam a terrible day. We did not mean to cause suffering. Our goal was to show how much smarter kids were when they were working with each other than when they had to work alone or, worse, when they were pitted against each other in a norm-referenced war of all against all. What better symbol of that war than the IQ test, and what better way to tackle the misuse of that test than to have the children show us that the test questions were uninteresting, ambiguous, and no match for the multiple and complex ways children might interpret them.

So we gave the children an IQ test that pitted teams of children against each other. Individuals were given questions, but if they were unsure of the answer, they could give their question to another child on their team. If one team couldn't arrive at an answer, the other team could have a try. Individuals and teams were both awarded points. Some managed more points than others, and some suffered more than others. Adam's difficulty became more obvious as the game went on, and we wondered how we could have ever organized such an event. Now years later, as cultural analysts, we have the same concern with an added question about the resources we had available for constructing such a scene. It was so easy to do, so in the matter of course, so—paradoxically—"natural." The children were from a highly successful interracial, interclass private school that charged tuition based on parental income. With an ideology based on John Dewey and Martin Luther King, the school offered the children both an environment in which they did not experience much competitive pressure and a challenging intellectual menu complete with tests and competitive games. Team competition is fun, particularly when it does not quite count, and we thought a great afternoon would be had by all.

When the children entered the room, they showed themselves to be ready to meet the demands of their culture. If we could set it up, they could respond accordingly. They immediately recognized from the single stool at the head of tables in a V shape that they were to have a quiz show or some kind of competition. Reggie yelled, "Hey, we gonna have a good day today. Anyone who wants to have a good day today, say 'Aye.'" Most of the kids yelled, "Aye." Then Adam made a more modest proposal: "Anybody who wants to *try* to make it a good day today, say 'Aye'" (Adam's emphasis). Only a few kids answered, halfheartedly.

Adam's first try during the IQ bee did not go well. He was the first to get something wrong, and he did so just as the other kids were talking about how easy all the questions were. As is the accepted practice with IQ tests, the questions got progressively more difficult as one moved through the test. As was the adaptive practice with Adam, he watched others handle the first few questions before he would venture to try one on his own, a sensible way to handle most situations but a lethal practice on a test in which the items get increasingly more difficult, more arbitrary, or more designed to show someone being wrong. With each new set of questions, Adam got the last and most difficult. Adam successfully avoided the easy questions about what animal bacon comes from and instead got the group's most difficult question on how many pounds are in a ton. Not only did Adam get it wrong, so did everyone else. Adam was the only one, however, to act as if he had been made smaller by the event. He covered his face with his hands and slowly slid down in his chair. He got smaller.

For his second question, which was about where the sun sets, Adam was urged on by his teammates to hand over his turn to someone else. "It's hard for him," they said, and "Remember, he can't guess." Adam got it wrong—"In the ocean?"—and so did his teammates before the other team gathered in a point with the right answer. The children noted that they covered all four directional possibilities in their guessing. Despite everyone getting it wrong, Adam continued to stand out, for only Adam had no points next to his name. He slunk down further in his chair. He was getting smaller as his problem got larger.

The third round of questions took up digit-span memory. The first question dealt with only three digits, and the children celebrated how easy the questions were. Gradually, they realized that each question upped the ante. Peter quickly told the story about his mother's friend who was "in school to be a test teacher." She practiced her tests on Peter, and he knew they could get difficult. We could also hear a whispered complaint from Adam that these questions were hard. Reggie got a question with five digits, and he slowly delivered the answer one digit and a pause at a time; everyone laughed and repeated his performance. Rikki got six digits in her question and missed one of them in her answer. By this time, Adam's turn was coming up. He had grown still smaller, sitting low in his seat, his hands over his face. Apparently, he was crying, and an adult asked, "Is this one too tough for you, Adam?" We were all beginning to squirm; this was not what we had had in mind.

By Adam's turn, he could expect seven digits. In addition to his having no points, his team was losing badly and his teammates could not afford his getting another answer wrong. Helene asked him to give her his turn, just as she had done on his previous turn, and he again declined. Adam may or may not have suffered, but he always tried and often cried. Nadine said that he should do it himself, an encouraging sentiment if Nadine hadn't been on the opposing team. Helene asked him why he was crying. Others answered that it was hard for him, and an adult suggested that he pass it by. Adam again claimed his turn even though, as one adult said, "Everybody misses some of them." A silence overtook the room as the tester directed attention to

Adam. He was asked to remember only four digits. He did it. Everyone cheered, even the children on the opposing team.

Helene: Will you pass it to me, Adam?
Tester: OK, Adam, is it your turn now?
Adam: I'm not passing it to anybody.
Helene: Oh-h boy (in a resigned voice).
Tester: It's your turn now, Adam, right?
Helene: Why are you crying, Adam?
Lucy: Cause it's hard. It's hard for him.
Scorekeeper): Well, just pass it by, that's all.
It's no big deal.
Helene: I'll do it for you, Adam, please?
Reggie: You want.
Adam: No, I don't want to pass it by (low and strained).
Nadine: No, let him do it himself.
Peter: He wants to answer questions, but they're hard.
Tester: He can try it.
Scorekeeper: Everybody misses some of them.
(Uh-hums of agreement from several children)
Tester: OK, Adam, you're ready?
(Adam's hands remain in front of his face.)
6,1,5,8.
Reggie: Ah!
Adam: 6,1,5,8?
(The children, except for Rikki and Adam, cheer, "Yea!")
Reggie: Gimme five Adam! (holding out his palm)
(Adam still has his head in his hands.)
Please?

(Adam shakes his head no, and the children laugh.)

Adam had tried to make it a good day, and for a while, it had not worked out that way. He was the one who had said that "if you try harder and harder, it will it just get worser and worser." This may apply to us all as we try to make our schools more palatable. Happily, things turned around in the next part of the test, which involved storytelling, Adam's specialty. He won a prize for the most points for the day, and a full year later when we had the children back for a discussion of the previous year's after-school club, his favorite memory was that he won the day when we had "that, you know, quiz show thing." He had had a good day (Hood, McDermott, and Cole 1980).

Since that time, with the help of a fully protective and expensive education, Adam has graduated from college. He has outlived his classification as a Learning Disabled child. Away from the environment that was so well organized to find him not knowing something, he can get on with the tasks that come his way. It is likely that in the

work world he does not have to spend his day as he did in the third grade, arranging to not get caught not knowing something. It is unlikely he has to spend his day not getting acquired by a Learning Disability.

The Cultural Construction of Learning Disabilities

The preceding case was meant to illuminate our point: There may have been something different about Adam, but this difference was not the source of the practical problems he encountered at times in his life. The problem did not consist in *his* "being" Learning Disabled as much as in his living *in a world* well organized to label and disable him. We do not claim to know what his difference, assuming there was one, consisted of, but we suspect that the search for the "it" of his difference has been quite dangerous to him. We do claim that the problem for him, for us as educators, and for us as analysts lies in the factuality of LD as a set of cultural and institutionally consequential practices that lead people with various degrees of authority or power to look for children to identify as Learning Disabled. Take away the institutions or limit their sphere of relevance and the "problem" disappears even if the difference does not.

Being different in the way, say, a severely dyslexic child is different does not make a Learning Disabled child in the cultural sense. Being acquired culturally by a Learning Disability does not make a child a Learning Disabled child in any neurological way. Our position, we insist throughout this book, does not require a theory of internalization, enculturation, or any other kind of "acceptance" by any person of the point of view of the other. We talk of Adam's sensitivity to his conditions, but we do not talk about his accepting the definitions that others suggest. His conditions were factual, culturally factual, as much a set of facts as the walls that surrounded the rooms in which our observations took place. No one could fail to feel pain when running into the walls, when being teased and otherwise identified even in the most benign ways as somehow unable to do something. Sensitivity to and practical consciousness of actual difficulties were not signs of Adam's self. Different children react differently to such pain. But sensitivity to personal pain must not hide the culture that constructs such painful conditions. Adam persisted in spite of the pain, and his having been born into a family that could afford the school he attended, it turned out eventually that his identification as Learning Disabled did not make much difference in his career. Other children might have been crushed. Still others might have veered into the defiant resistance of dropouts, street toughs, and motorcycle gangs (e.g., Willis 1977; MacLeod 1994). Learning Disability is not a destiny, but it is one of the roads open to children. Worse, now that it has become institutionalized, the livelihood of many well-educated people is dependent on a goodly number of children walking down this road.

Learning Disability, in our words, is a property of America, ideologically, legitimately, institutionally, and even economically. How this became the case is mostly outside the purview of this book, though we suggest the presence of a cultural imperative that has driven the evolution of the category over the past century. Ideologically, LD appears as a noncultural category that refers to an inner property of the child (whether genetic or internalized through various processes). As educational psychologists put forward a case for their skill at diagnosing LD and reformers made the case for the moral need for political institutions to legitimate the work of the psychologists, the diagnosis entered the institutional world. Administrators formulated regulations, teachers were required to follow them, and specialists were defined, trained, and put to work doing what they must legitimately do. This long historical process made the LD identification both morally good and commonsensically natural. If we searched for the earlier roots, we could probably show how the process is somehow related to industrialization, capitalism, and other aspects of the economic structure of modern societies. It is also related to the ideological individualism of Euro-American societies and to the liberal protest against capitalism and industrialization. After all, by the standards of modern democracy, if it makes sense to argue that all children are in some ways "different" from each other, then it is appropriate to construct institutions to identify these differences to ensure that each child is treated differently.

NOTES

As mentioned in the introduction, Adam's story was gathered during an interdisciplinary research project in the late 1970s when Michael Cole and the Laboratory of Comparative Human Cognition were at the Rockefeller University in Manhattan. The project was focused on the problem of ecological validity in psychological research, and as part of our effort to identify the various contexts in which different cognitive skills were made manifest, the performances of individual children, Adam included, became a way to organize our data. Different combinations of us have written the Adam story for various theoretical purposes. Although written from scratch, the present account borrows arguments and transcripts from Cole and Traupmann (1981); Hood, McDermott, and Cole (1980); McDermott (1993); and Newman, F. and Holzman (1993).

1. Joseph Reimer conducted the interview, using the Kolhberg moral dilemma stories as an eliciting device. In his dissertation, Reimer (1977) had shown that in a real-life group setting, children could often raise their level of moral reasoning over what they would display in a one-to-one interview. Because we knew the children of Adam's class well, because we had watched them on a daily basis handling moral dilemmas such as how much to tease one another, we were anxious to interview them with the details of their own lives at hand.

2. By a commonsense reading of experimental psychology, we should have been able to find some relation between what children were asked to do in the laboratory and what they found necessary to do in the real world, but we were able to describe little in everyday life that looked like what psychologists modeled and measured; on the implications of this negative finding for the ways we normally think about cognition and learning, see Cole, Hood, and McDermott (1978), Newman, D., Griffin, and Cole (1989), McDermott and Hood (1982) and the summary appendix in McDermott (1993).

3. A New York Times (April 8, 1994) report shows the result of having money available for a "careful" screening program for Learning Disabilities in a school for overachievers. The pres-

tigious Dalton School screened all its children and classified 36 percent of its first-graders as at risk, this despite a very high IQ average and an SES range at the top of all scales. On the politics underlying such madness, see Coles (1987).

4. The sociohistorical school of Vygotsky (1978, 1986) and his followers is an exception, and they have helped to remind us that a full account of the complexities of everyday life would overwhelm any account of what an individual subject might be up to at any given time. Fortunately, linguists, conversation analysts, and kinesicists have been describing the interactional world in enough detail to give body to claims about the ingenuity required of people in everyday life.

5. Arensberg (1982) once noted that a psychological analysis requires only one person behaving, a social analysis requires two people interacting, and a cultural analysis requires three people, two interacting and one interpreting the interaction. Our point, as Arensberg would agree, is that even a psychological analysis of Adam, if it is not to distort him by ignoring his circumstances, requires an account of him in interaction with others in ongoing institutional arrangements across scenes.

2 The Farrells and the Kinneys at Home: Literacies in Action

Hervé Varenne and
Ray McDermott

In the introduction, we used the metaphor of culture as a house, a mansion really, in a village of houses into which one gets born and on which one is continually at work. This is a crowded village where many others are also at work both demolishing and reconstructing the collective dwelling with the tools and leftover material found in the various rooms. According to the logic of this metaphor, one could think of Adam (and all the other participants) as moving from room to room and in each being noticed, labeled, and treated as a different kind of person with different (dis)abilities.

Different things could be done in each of the rooms with different consequences for all involved. The metaphor might help us understand the historical details organizing what Adam and his consociates did while cooking bread or playing at being tested. The shape of the rooms in which we watched Adam were the product of an institution, the School, that none of the people involved could be said in any way to control. None of them had participated in the construction of the School, although a few had helped shape the particular school Adam found himself in. A few participants hoped they were working at altering a Testing institution that the researchers directly opposed but with which all were struggling. Adam himself was certainly unaware of the educational theories and their developers, who were somehow present when he asked for help at a time when it was relevant for him to be noticed as Learning Disabled. As researchers into the processes of the School, we must seek a systematic awareness that is difficult to achieve when we find ourselves in the same rooms Adam occupied.

Starting in this fashion allowed us to escape the temptation to blame Adam's peers, teachers, or school as the proximate participants who made difficulties for him. The pathos in Adam's situation was not misunderstanding or misdiagnosis but the blinding evidence that things were just the way they must be. Over the next few chapters, we explore the implications of this stance. One power of the house-with-rooms metaphor is that it allows us continually to be reminded of the movement