

The Collective Work of Engineering Losers

Abstract According to Vygotsky, personality is the ensemble of real relations that we have lived with others. If personality is the ensemble of societal relations, and if who people are coincides with the material conditions of their productions, then school-based games that produce failure may contribute in non-negligible ways to the production of loser personalities. A case study is used to exhibit the kind of *collective* work by means of which failures and losers are recognizably produced and are produced for being recognized as such. The study thereby develops a political dimension of Vygotskian theory not frequently encountered.

Key words: joint work; Vygotsky; personality; societal relations; material conditions; ethnomethodology

As individuals express their lives, so they are. What they are therefore coincides with their production, both with *what* they produce and with *how* they produce. What individuals are depends on the material conditions of their production. (Marx & Engels, 1978, p. 21, original emphasis)

[T]he person = a clot of societal relations. . . . Personality is an ensemble of societal relations. (Vygotskij, 2005, p. 1030)

“He has never won,” says Alice, a five-year-old kindergarten student about her peer Jamie, who just has failed another time at a classroom task, which involves remembering the complete set of ten things that the children had been shown earlier in the day. We are near the end of May,

and since the preceding November they had been working on this task, slated as a game. A track record has been established that everyone in the 26-student class can see, and has participated in establishing. Jamie has never won. The statement in fact constitutes the reply turn that marks the preceding turn as a question: “Is he going to win?” Jamie never won, and, implied as a possibility in Alice’s constative reply, there is a possibility that he never will. He has been losing at the game, and perhaps will end up being tagged as a loser.

In both introductory quotations, the nature of individuals, personality, is attributed to production and relations with others in society. In such a framework, if someone loses all of the time, as Jamie does, there is a good possibility he will end up being a loser. The research question answered in this study, however, is not whether Jamie ultimately will or will not win; instead, it concerns the collective, societal (joint) and culturally specific work that people do, not merely perceivably but indeed for the purpose to be perceived. *What are the endogenous methods and work by means of which failure and, in the long run, losers are produced visibly and for the purpose to be seen as societal and cultural fact?*

The study was designed to be a contribution to the cultural-historical theory of Vygotsky, who, near the end of his life, proposed *experience* [pereživanie] as a relevant category (Vygotsky, 1994). This category refers to the unity/identity [edinstvo] of person and environment, here denoted by {person | environment}. The relevant environment, however, is not the same for those present in some situation, which Vygotsky exemplifies in a case of three children with an abusive mother. Vygotsky did not address in his text on the environment the fact that human beings not only undergo their conditions but also contribute to producing them (Marx & Engels, 1978). Thus, the experienced environment is different for Jamie and Alice, and therefore has different consequences for their developmental trajectories. It is not that the “environment” does something to the child, whether or not it is captured by “L[earning]D[isability],” and therefore affects its developmental trajectory (e.g., McDermott, 1993). Instead, {person | environment} is to be understood transactionally and, therefore, is irreducible to individual actions, those of the child or the environment. Because Alice, other students, and teacher are part of Jamie’s

environment, anything cultural (including winning and losing) is produced endogenously (i.e., within that setting). That is, this study exhibits the work by means of which students like Jamie contribute producing the environment to which they are subject and subjected and in which they fail. Thus, whereas a child does not produce its LD (Varenne & McDermott, 1998), Jamie does contribute to producing to the visibility of his continued losing at the game of remembering.

The answer articulated here focuses on the societal relations, which, according to the introductory quotation from Vygotsky's work, will have been the origin of personality once a person is identified as (permanent) loser. The study is framed in the spirit of the first opening quotation, in which Marx/Engels state that what human beings are is the result not only *what* they produce—in Jamie's case, a number of remembered items short of the entire list—but also, and perhaps more importantly *how* they produce. A study conducted in Australia shows that the real object/motive of schools, the production of grades and grade reports, coproduces subject-matter-specific or school failure, and, thereby, the losers at the game of schooling (Roth & McGinn, 1998). The nature of the work that produces failure is the topic of the current study; and this work is cultural and collective in nature, the condition and result of societal relations. These relations are the genetic origin of personality, as Vygotsky suggests in the second quotation. In his expression that he had culled from Marx/Engels, the ensemble of societal relations that a person participates in is congealed in his personality. Whereas a similar statement about higher psychological functions can be read in one way only—a function was a relation first, but not all relations become psychological functions (Vygotsky, 1989)—in the case of personality, no such constraint was formulated.

Societal Relations, Inequality, and Personality

In the second introductory quotation, Vygotsky states that societal relations are at the origin of what people later become, as Marx/Engels state. Societal relations were investigated in an important study of cultural stereotypes, which exhibited the reproductive cycle of relations that

reproduce gender inequality in mathematics (Walkerdine, 1988). The study shows how cultural stereotypes are both the source and the outcome of gender inequities—e.g., lower participation rates, unequal job opportunities, and lower incomes. Apparently innocent suggestions in school handouts encourage mothers and their daughters to engage in tasks—measuring and weighing while cooking or handling money and counting while shopping—that reproduce traditional types of generally invisible housework often conducted by women. In this work, mathematics has a particular role tied to the gender-typical work. That is, in their society-specific relations, mothers and girls—despite all positive intentions to help the latter to get better at doing mathematics—reproduce inequitable societal relations. It is in such relations that school failure is not only produced but also visibly inscribed as school failure in the classroom, making it publically available for every participant to witness (McDermott, 1993). Both the production and identification of success and failure are continued achievements that do not stop with schooling but continue on “with no fixed ending” (Varenne, Goldman, & McDermott, 1997) and, thereby, become determinant features in human development.

The production of inequitable societal relations continues, and indeed tends to be acerbated, at school. The very *raison d’être* of schooling was the production—by means of the organization of physical space, time, and forms of societal relations—of a hierarchically ordered student body, a hierarchy that provided differential access to subsequent employment opportunities (Foucault, 1975). Ethnographic studies in modern school settings provide evidence that the outcome of this production is a function of class origin: at school, middle- and upper-class students find again their culture-specific relations with others, which thereby come to be reinforced, whereas working-class students experience clashes between their own and school culture (Eckert, 1989; Varenne et al., 1997; Willis, 1977). As a result, working-class students tend to end up in working class, whereas middle- and upper-class students reproduce, and end up in the class of their parents. Thus, for example, in Belgium, as in many other countries, there are class-related inequalities with respect to accessing tertiary studies (e.g., Van Campenhoudt, Dell’Aquila, & Dupriez, 2008). France “beats the records of injustice” when it comes to success in schools,

exhibiting itself as “incapable to make succeed the children of the least privileged” (Battaglia & Collas, 2013). In Germany, working class students not only are under-represented in the academic, university preparatory stream of schooling but also their achievement is significantly lower, correlating with parent education, number of books at home, and socio-economic status (Maaz, Baeriswyl, & Trautwein, 2011). But societal class and the associated relations alone do not account for failure, and even children from wealthy families may not measure up in school tasks and testing (McDermott, 1993) though their parents tend to do a lot so that they may win in the educational race (Varenne et al., 1997).

Little attended to in the above-mentioned ethnographies tend to be the serious cognitive consequences that societal relations have for the individual participant. Thus, it is said that “any higher psychological function . . . was the societal relation between two people” (Vygotsky, 1989, p. 56). In addition to the higher psychological functions themselves, the relations between these functions also have their genetic origin as the real societal relations between people (Vygotsky, 1989). The consequence is that the personality of an individual comes to be the ensemble of the societal relations s/he has lived in the past.¹ Personality is not determined biologically but is entirely societal and historical (Vygotsky, 1997b). It is something like a knot-work that arises from the knitting together of the object/motives of the different societal activities in which a person participates (Leont’ev, 1982). The forming of the first knots can be observed in childhood as the result of the relation that a child entertains with others. Leont’ev describes the case of children observed in experimental settings where they are asked to get an out-of-reach object without leaving their place. The experimenter leaves the room. The child, after some unsuccessful attempts, then gets up, takes the object, and returns to his place. The experimenter, upon returning, praises the child and offers a reward. The child refuses, and begins to cry when questioned about it. Leont’ev explains the observations in this way: For the child there had been

¹ The Russian philosopher E. V. Il’enkov also articulated this position, which was debated by D. Bakhurst, who contested it, and a number of Russian philosophers including F. T. Mikhailov, V. A. Lektorsky, V. S> Bibler, and V. V. Davidov (Bakhturst et al., 1995).

no conflict in the task itself; instead, a conflict arises in the relation between two activities, one related to the experimenter the other related to the object. For the purpose of the present study, therefore, the issue is not the performance on some task as such, but the “(knot-) work” tying the task-related work and the societal relations within the classroom. We can read Walkerdine’s (1988) analyses in the same way, as a description of the knot-working of different activities. Her ethnographic study describes how cognitive development—through educational activities at home—comes to be tied to the domestic work rather than to the many other things that children do.

Ethnographic Context

This study was designed to articulate a concrete instance of the collective, societal work that produces failures and losers in educational settings. Because of its society-specific, inherently collective nature, such work may be observed in many settings. Thus, this study is interested in and analyzes the work in which the participants are but the staff that populate the phenomenon of interest. That is, the study follows the proposal “that it is the workings of the phenomenon that exhibit among its other details the population that staffs it” (Garfinkel, 1996, p. 5). Just as everyday traffic makes “its staff available as ‘typical’ drivers, ‘bad’ drivers, ‘close in’ drivers” (p. 5), the workings of school tasks and games exhibit winners and losers at the educational game in play. These workings are not a function of the particular population that staffs the phenomenon.

The data used here derive from a study in a kindergarten class ($n = 26$), guided by a 26-year veteran teacher.² From the beginning of the school year, the five-year-old children and their teacher have worked on a curricular task designed to assist the former in remembering sets of 10 household items by making them produce signs (drawings) to access their memory. To aid them in their task, the children were asked to produce signs as auxiliary devices in the manner

² The data have been collected following ethics protocols in the country of origin. All identifying detail has been removed, as per request by researchers and participants, for the purpose of meeting the confidentiality clause of the informed consent.

Vygotsky (1997b, 1999) describes, though the task was not originally designed as such. Together, all the signs constituted a (shared) public library of tools to be used in accessing and producing memory. The children are challenged to reproduce all 10 items presented to them; only when all 10 are recalled are they winning. By the time the episode featured here occurred, the game has been prepared and played for nearly 7 months in individual and collective configuration for a total of 39 times. Relevant detail about the task and task context is provided as part of the analysis.

The current study inscribes itself in the cultural-historical tradition of Vygotsky, especially the theoretical move he was taking near the end of his life when he sought inspiration in Spinoza, who had postulated that there is only one substance that has body (extension) and thought as its attributes (Mikhailov, 2001; Vygotsky, 2010). If there is only one substance, then societal phenomena need to be understood as produced within (i.e. endogenously). Thus, although this study is situated within the Vygotskian tradition, the analyses assume a standpoint that typically is taken by those doing research under the aegis of ethnomethodology and conversation analysis. The analysis is focused on the endogenous production of the world, whose relational structures are visibly exhibited as part of doing whatever participants agree to be doing; that is, the analysis articulates “seeing things ‘through the actor’s eyes” (Sharrock & Button, 2011, p. 39). To achieve this purpose, I “*use the ways members have of making clear to each other and to themselves what is going on to locate to our own satisfaction an account of what it is that they are doing with each other*” (McDermott, Gospodinoff, & Aron, 1978, p. 247, original emphasis). This requires the investigator to analyze turn pairs, because any response includes what the recipient hears or how s/he has been affected in other ways (e.g., active listening, something sensed or heard). To make this approach more explicit, parts of the final turn pair that concludes the episode is represented together with the words *that are ringing in the recipients’ ears* (grey).³

³ A common transcription convention is used (Jefferson, 2004). Underline = emphasis; UPPER CASE = louder than normal; °degree signs° = softer than normal; (0.98) = pauses in seconds; hh = outbreath; .hh = period indicates in-breath; ?.,; = punctuation marks strongly rising, weakly rising, strongly falling, weakly falling intonation in statement; “=” = latching of sounds; ((draws)) = observers description; > < = increased speech rate of enclosed words; < > = decreased speech rate.

- 153 S: [he never won.]
 154 T: [he never won.] >no he will win, he will end winning i am certain he will win.<

As scholars from very different scholarly disciplines point out, the analysis of conversations requires researchers to account for the fact that some statement is in fact reality for both interlocutors (Vološinov, 1930; Vygotskij, 1934). The teacher's (T) response includes her active listening to what the student (S) has said more narrowly and her perception of the situation as a whole. The second part of the response (i.e., the reply) is what she actually says and does. This second part is intelligible only if it also takes into account the intended recipient, here, the students who made statements as to Jamie's defeat. In the response (what is heard + what is said), therefore, two voices are mingled. Together, the two turns constitute an *irreducible collective fact*.

Two central purposes of an ethnographically adequate description are (a) the construction of an account of how the members themselves produce and make visible the manifest order of their situation and (b) to do so in ways that readers of the account can witness for themselves this endogenous, orderly and ordered production of societal order.

The Joint Work and Public Production of Losing

The particular game includes the language normally associated with competitive games—indeed, a language game, which is an activity and the language that goes with it (Wittgenstein, 1953/1997)—where there are winners and those who do not win and therefore are losers. There have been suggestions that in the American society, the competitive race metaphor of education is pervasive (Varenne et al., 1997). In the associated discourse, testing becomes a competition of the individual against others and against themselves. The episode analyzed here, though from a non-American society, also was organized according to a game with winners. The failure to win

(a loss) comes to be produced in public and comes to be perceivably inscribed as such in semi/permanent records on the chalkboard available for inspection and comparison. There are stakes and the outcomes are uncertain in the beginning, even though the test performance has already been completed partially in the drawing of a set of 10 things he has remembered. The second part of the child's performance comes in the form of his reading the list of items based on the pictorial codes previously produced and made available to the children on a public display. This display therefore constitutes a lexicon of signs that may appear in the set of items that the children are asked to remember.

The episode is clearly demarcated by the participants and for the participants in that it invites and terminates the turn of one child, Jamie, here to produce something that is to be evaluated. The episode begins with a participant designed invitation | acceptance to a form of a language-game and ends with two children's statements, one querying whether Jamie will (ever?) win and the other that Jamie has never won, which the teacher takes up by stating that Jamie will win in the end (i.e., he has not won now but should do so in some unknown future). She adds a conditional: if one (i.e. Jamie) respects the drawings.

The Set Up: "Are You Going to Win Today?"

The video clip begins as one of the children is entering her score on the task into a table on the chalkboard, thereby making it publicly available to everyone how many items she has correctly recalled. At the same time, Jamie takes a seat in front of the cardboard screen behind which the ten objects to be recalled are hidden from him, overseen by the a classmate. The participants demarcate the episode from other classroom events with a question | reply turn pair concerning Jamie's success ("are you going to win," turn 001), paired with a specially emphasized, affirmative "Well yes!" (turn 002). In fact, the teacher first invites Jamie to wait, and then offers up a question. That is, prior to Jamie actually beginning, he is invited to wait, reply to the question about possible success.

There is a pause, then Jamie continues with a confident “after all!” but then adds a hedge “I hope” (turn 002). This “I hope” constitutes the first part of the next turn pair, “(so) you hope, eh?” There is a pause, providing the teacher with an opportunity to continue, “We, too, we hope” (turn 007). There is another pause and then another invitation to begin, here instantiated by the statement, “We are listening to you” (turn 009). The offer is taken up after a pause, as Jamie reads the first item of his list, “spoon” (turn 011).

001 T: wait jamie (0.56) are you winning jamie.
002 (0.19)
003 J: well YES (0.81) but really Hh::hh (0.26) i hope.
004 (0.33)
005 T: you hope eh?
006 (0.87)
007 we too we hope.
008 (1.00)
009 we are listening to you.
010 (0.98)
011 J: SPOON.

In this fragment that opens the assessment episode, the potential outcomes are framed in terms of winning. Jamie is asked to project whether he will be winning. Even though the first two parts of the reply are positive, Jamie’s turn comes to end with a hedge: he hopes to be winning rather than being sure about it.

The invitation to the game is a setup. In setting up what is to come as a (language-) game that can be won, the possibility of losing is set up simultaneously. In contrast to games that are played without requiring winners and losers, this one, in setting the goal to be won, also configures losing as the alternative outcome. Whereas in (language-) games that do not have winners and

losers—because they are played for their own sake—participation is success, the outcome of this game is uncertain. This uncertainty comes to be formulated in terms of hope both on the part of the child and on the part of the teacher. The child hopes to be winning, and the teacher, initially affirming the statement in repeating it (so you hope), then uses a formulation of the generalized collective (we) to state that she and perhaps others, too, are hoping so. Winning no longer is certain but something to be hoped for, without any guarantee that this outcome will actually occur. Losing at the (language-) game is as much or even more prefigured than winning at it. There is therefore a contradiction in that the only hope for winning requires participating in the game, which simultaneously produces the perhaps much greater possibility of losing.

“At Least Three [Objects, Drawings] Are Missing!”

Jamie has been reading out the items from his list of drawings. The teacher has passed by to check on the progress and initiated the child’s use of a yellow marker to tick off the items he has already read. The teacher eventually returns again, initiating an articulation of the current state, “So?” (turn 097). There is a pause, and then the controller states, “At least three” (turn 099). In response, and following a pause, there is an invitation | acceptance turn that offers an opportunity to go to the panel figuring the drawings of all possible objects in the game. This list of drawings has been established over the four month preceding this particular day, serving as their shared written lexicon. The opportunity is realized as Jamie walks off towards it, after picking up his own list that followed being invited to do so (turn 101).

097 T: so?

098 (0.82)

099 C: °at least three.°

100 (1.30)

101 T: you can go see on the panel to win to know ((*Jamie gets up*)) ah hold take your list ((*Jamie takes the list and walks to the panel of shared codes at the other end of the classroom*))

Integral to the reply is the connection between going to see to know for the purpose of winning. That is, it is there that Jamie can find and thereby come to know what it takes to win. Up to this point he is not on the winning track: There are “at least three” items that he has not had at all or has not correctly identified. At this point, he falls short of winning: he is in the process of losing. By walking towards the panel on the other side of the classroom, he accepts the invitation to look, see, and perhaps come to know those items that he has been missing. The shortfall therefore is inscribed everywhere, in the voice of the student calling it out, in the teacher’s invitation to go to the board, or in Jamie’s movement to the board that is to help him remember.

“[You] Lost.” “[I] Lost”: Public Recognition of a Failure/Loss

Jamie has spent about 50 seconds at the wall with the drawings pinned up, when the teacher calls his name, inviting him to return stating that he has had enough time to look. On his way back to the examination desk, a question is offered, “did it come back to you or not?” (turn 107). There is a pause. Then another statement with the rising intonation of a question is proffered, “It does not come back to you?” Jamie’s response includes as reply three back-and-forth sideward negating movements of the head. Yet another pause ensues, brought to a close by a “so well” (turn 111), which is taken up by the statement “Lost” on the part of another child (turn 113). There is another long pause while Jamie makes the final steps until arriving at the desk. Here, the teacher takes Jamie’s sheet from him to place it on the desk while stating, “well so,” to which Jamie replies, “lost” (turn 116). There is then an invitation | acceptance sequence to look over the walls of the heretofore hidden items that Jamie was to have but has not recalled and where the teacher points to one of the items with her index finger.

- 107 T: did it come back to you or not?
108 (1.16)
109 its not coming back to you?
110 (0.87) (*In returning, Jamie shakes his head three times*)
111 good well.
112 (0.58)
113 S: lost.
114 (4.45)
115 T: so what;=
116 J: lost.
117 (0.86)
118 T: come see (*takes the list and places it on the desk*)

In this fragment, Jamie's failed attempt at winning is exposed and exhibited in public. The query | reply sequence exhibits that those items that he misses for a win have not come back to him, nor are these currently returning. It is a witnessing peer who first makes an evaluative statement for everyone to hear: Jamie has not won but lost. Jamie subsequently makes the same statement, thereby affirming the loss.

“There is no Drawing Like This in What We Want for Winning!”

The preceding fragment ended with an invitation to look behind the screen, which Jamie accepts. This leads to a series of exchanges to look at specific items. Among others, the teacher counts out loud the number of items on Jamie's sheet, ending with “nine,” then offering a question, “How many does it take? There is no reply and the teacher, pointing to an object offers up another question, “This is what?” Jamie replies, “I don't know,” to which the teacher replies

together with a rise of both shoulders, a bending forward of the neck, and a subsequent turn to look over the screen, as if attempting to verify what might be missing. The teacher responds, “So, well, how much do we need?” (turn 131).

126 T: and that one you– did you draw them?

127 J: .hHh YES ((*The controller shows him the toothpaste*))

128 T: ONE TWO THREE FOUR FIVE SIX SEVEN EIGHT NINE, ((*she points to each drawing that she counts*))

129 (0.80)

130 J: houu: ((*lifts shoulders*))

131 T: good so it takes how many?

132 (1.85)

133 this is what? ((*pointing to drawing*))

134 J: °i do not know°

In the apparently unfinished count of the diagrams, which is taken up with an interjection marking surprise, and a statement concerning the number required, the lack of a diagram comes to be established jointly in the societal arena. Everyone witnessing the situation now can see that losing the (language-) game in part is due to a missing item. Another problem exists in the presence of a drawing that does not correspond to one of the posted drawings. In this, the list of things Jamie was to recall included a representation that was not part of the shared signs and, therefore, inherently did not have a referent (sense). This was so not only for those like the teacher looking at Jamie’s list, but also because it was an item that did not serve Jamie as a sign to mediate his memory. When the teacher points to it while offering up the question as to what this was (turn 133), Jamie replies in a subdued voice by saying that he does not know.

“Will He Win?” “He Never Won!”

In the episode-terminating fragment, the loss comes to be restated several times. It begins with the offer of query to Jamie as to whether he had acted according to what had been decided for winning, but there is no reply. The teacher offers up another query, this time to the children generally: “You said he had won how many?” (turn 149). Again, the offer is not taken up and, as before, a pause develops. The child who had the responsibility for checking Jamie’s responses says, “Will he win?,” which is taken up in the statement, “We are only missing three” (turn 152). Another child offers an evaluative comment: he has never won, which a longer teacher statement takes up stating that Jamie *will* win, that he will end winning. But then a hedge introducing some uncertainty follows, “I am certain that he will win” (turn 154). After a pause, another statement articulates the conditions that had been stated before, “If the drawings are respected” (turn 156).

- 147 T: did you do how we decided to win?
 148 (1.80) ((*Jamie gazes in the distance*))
 149 you said he won how many.
 150 (0.93)
 151 C: is he going to win,
 152 T: only three are left. ((*Jamie goes to the chalkboard and records his score; another student takes his place to be tested*))
 153 S: he never won.
 154 T: >no he will win, he will end winning i am certain he will win.<
 155 (0.94)
 156 if >we had well said it,< <if one respects the drawings.>

Immediately following the statement that only three items are missing (for Jamie to win), the end of Jamie’s turn is also accomplished. First, the teacher is taking the sheet of drawings away from Jamie. Second, another child is taking his place in front of the screen. Third, Jamie is

walking towards the board to inscribe his score, recording it among the other scores available and, thereby making available the level of his achievement in the context of what all other children have achieved.

Following the statement of another child that Jamie has not won, the teacher begins with an adverb of negation, “no.” She then affirms that Jamie will win and moves to add the qualification, “I am certain that he will win.” Such qualifications are well known from the sciences, modifying a matter of fact to be less of a hard fact when it is associated with the knowledge of an individual rather than being a form of general knowledge (Latour & Woolgar, 1986). The statement also affirms that the victory *will* come in the future and, thereby, not only marks that it has not yet come but also, in the context of an attempt that has just ended, it marks this attempt as a failure. But, because of the modification, whether that success will come has become less than certain, allowing for future events where Jamie might but does not have to lose yet another time.

Although Jamie’s defeat in this (language-) game has been sealed and publicly acknowledged, the hope of a win is also evoked. There is a future orientation already in turn 152, which states that *only* three are missing from the 10 (of 10) items required for a win. This “only” flags what others know: in past attempts, Jamie has achieved even less, but now there are only three missing. It also flags that there is not much left to reach a winning level. It is this small step required that gives reason to the hope that Jamie will achieve a winning result (eventually). He will be able to win, and she quickly adds that this has been said before, *if* the drawings (published and posted) are respected. This phrase is articulated much slower, more paced, and with more rhythmically produced emphases than anything else the teacher had said during the entire episode.

The last statement of this episode states the hope that Jamie will eventually win, but it also states what doing so will require: playing by the rules and using only those drawings that are part of the published and therefore shared dictionary of signs. Not only is future winning here premised on and conditioned by respecting the lexicon, but also the present performance is

characterized as being in non-compliance with the established language-game. Not playing by the rule is associated with a form of penalty: losing. One of the reasons for Jamie's loss was that he did not play by the rules, which complements the error he made in missing one item.

Jamie records the loss at the language-game on the chalkboard, where other children also record their scores. It not only has been made present in the rather ephemeral medium of ongoing talk but also permanently (at least for the day) in a public record (subsequently transcribed into the records of the teacher and researcher). At least in this instance, perhaps on this day, Jamie is not a winner but a loser, a fact that is not just some subjective construction in the minds of individuals. Instead, it is a fact that many have witnessed and other children besides Jamie and the teacher have publicly acknowledged as such.

Discussion

This study was designed to exhibit the joint, societal work that produces failures in school-related tasks and games. The tasks may not be intended to function in this way. The researchers who provided me with access to the database told me after reading a draft of this text that they never intended those results shown here. Such failures and losses, because these depend on societal relations that come to be knotted to actual object-related performances, may subsequently show up as higher psychological functions specifically and, together with it, show up as aspects of personality understood as the congealment of all societal relations generally (Leont'ev, 1982; Vygotsky, 1989). It is well known that schooling reproduces and produces inequalities; the actual work producing inequality and the micro-politics of this work are less well known and attended to. To understand the developmental trajectory of a child requires considering it in its constitutive relation with the experienced environment (Vygotsky, 1994), that is, requires considering the {person | environment} unity/identity that is of a transactional nature. Such transactions are observable. Thus, the present analysis shows that we do not need speculate about meanings and other constructions that might take place in the heads of the participants—as

this often occurs in studies of the cultural-historical tradition. Instead, the present analysis takes the participants' actions and statements in reply to preceding actions and statements as evidence of how these were taken on the "shop floor" of activity-specific reality (Garfinkel, 2002). The problem for the researcher is to "describe in embodied congregational workplace-specific details the work of making and describing . . . social facts" (p. 95). Furthermore, this study focuses on joint (societal) work of constituting the reality of the classroom world, which cannot be reduced to the individual participants, who are understood to staff the irreducibly societal phenomenon of interest. Thus, Jamie does not just fail to achieve at a certain level, as determined by a researcher with special empirical methods, but having failed is an observable (societal) fact marked as such for everyone to see in this classroom not in the least because of the inscription of the result on the chalkboard.

Consequences of the Primacy of the Society-Specific Relation

This study exhibits how the relations between Jamie, his teacher, and his peers are real societal facts. In Alice's statement that Jamie had never won one can see that he had failed to win in repeated attempts, correctly reflecting what the researcher had recorded in the six preceding attempts since January where Jamie accurately recalled between three and six of the ten objects. The sequence of losses was a societal fact. Vygotsky (1989) and his successors, grounded in the works of Marx and Engels, recognize the primacy of the societal. The primacy of the societal means something quite different to him than frequently taken in the literature. Thus, rather than referring to the individual constructing what some collectivity—e.g., group, class, or society—constructed before, the primacy of the societal means that higher psychological (including mental) functions and every single aspect of personality exist *as* societal relations. That world and the associated societal facts are observable and just as real (objective) as material facts; and, as facts, participants mark them to be observed and contribute to producing them so that both fact and production thereof are visible. This study thereby highlights a political dimension of Vygotsky's work not frequently encountered (but see Stetsenko, 2013): the development of

children not only depends on culture writ large but indeed on society-specific human relations that differ across social class, which leads to the “[personality’s] class-oriented character” (Vygotsky, 1993, p. 161). These aspects “of the person are formed from the systems that are brought into the person from the outside” (Vygotsky, 1997a, p. 106), that is, they are created at the environmental pole of the {person | environment} unity/identity.

In school situations, there are some children who immediately succeed in the task that are posed. Others fail initially, but over time come to exhibit the levels of performance that are demanded of them. Thus, six days later (May 31), Jamie does indeed accurately recall the ten items and, therefore, achieves a winning score. Such students or children may be denoted by specific terms that mark the delay in achieving at a designated target level, for example, in a term such as “slow learner.” But things such as “slow learners” do not exist in themselves. These are the outcomes of societal relations and conditions that others subsequently pin to an individual (e.g., McDermott, 1993; Mehan, 1993). Concerned with school failure, Varenne and McDermott (1998) point out that the child does not produce phenomena such as learning disability (LD), which would have its equivalent here if a tag such as “slow learner” were to be produced. In the same vein, Eckert (1989) is concerned with the social-class-specific relations produced in and out of school, but these relations are not topics of the students’ discourse. In this study, however, Jamie does indeed participate in making losing visible as much as he contributes to making visible the fact that he knows about it. The contradiction is that Jamie has to participate to have any hope at winning; but in participating, he also is set up to lose again. Whereas he actively participates to this public production of failure and the visibility of the phenomenon, he does so while being subject and subjected to the societal activity of schooling, with its characteristic forms of productions and *society*-specific student–teacher and student-student relations. That is, the experienced environment [pereživanie] Vygotsky (1994) theorizes is not to be understood as *external* to the person; instead, it is both constitutive of and constituted by the person in its transactional relation within the {person | environment} unity/identity.

In many school situations, such as when students write exams and tests, the processes tend to be hidden or less explicit. In the present episode, we observe how children already before entering primary school participate in the public production and articulation of failure. In a somewhat fortuitous manner, the language-game offered to children is that of a game or competition in which winners are distinguished from those who are not winning, inherently losers here in an academic game of remembering a number of items. The unintended and contradictory result of setting up educational tasks as competitive games is the production of losers. Although some readers might want to argue that winning and losing is part of life, strong arguments have been made against competition as necessary or desirable (Kohn, 1992). Competition is not a necessary condition for an activity to count as a game—children play with trucks and dolls without having winning and losing as a goal.

Winning Games Versus Loser-Producing Games

This text begins with a quotation from a Marx/Engels text, which states that *what* we are coincides with the outcomes and process of our productions, which depend on the reigning conditions.⁴ Here, the productive activity is a language-game—a game plus the related language—that constitutes a condition and a mode of production with specific outcomes (winning, losing). It is apparent that the children participate in this language-game in the way that they have been invited. They are familiar with the fact—and explicitly state so—that not achieving the goal, not winning, is equivalent to losing. The children themselves articulate the adjective “lost,” and, thereby, perhaps extend in a way unintended by the teacher the language-game associated with competitive games. In fact, looking for failure (or someone’s learning disability) may “may become something like a sport in the student’s] class, a subset of the wider sport of finding each other not knowing things” (McDermott, 1993, p. 291). By participating in the competitive game, participants reify the possibility of ending up as winners or losers. This is especially apparent when we consider our everyday experiences that show that even young

⁴ Marx/Engels use the German term “Verhältnisse,” which translates both “relations” and “conditions.”

children state when they like a game and when they do not. A case study among young Brazilian children (4–5 years of age) exhibits and theorizes that even young children create new games that no longer correspond to established classroom norms that eventually become the dominant games in play (Goulart & Roth, 2006). In that situation, however, what initially is marginal activity is not marked as such but tolerated by all the other participants. This may have made possible the eventually observed overturn that turns it into the central form of participation and what the teachers have previously designed as curricular activity has become marginal. In such studies, as in the present one, everyone present in the setting and taking part in the game “is part of the choreography that produces moments for its public appearance” (McDermott, 1993, p. 291), including the marking of winners and losers. Losing, as winning, “is all over the classroom as an interactional possibility” (p. 291). Indeed, the classroom may be just a small part of a much larger ecology (e.g., a town or city) that is shaped by the metaphor of education as a race (e.g. Varenne et al., 1997).

It is often assumed that games and competing are part of culture; and losing, as winning, is part of cultural experience (see Kohn, 1992, for a critique of this position). But it is not true that every person likes to participate in competitive endeavors. Studies in the cultural-historical tradition show that youths often are content in producing something without comparing their own productions—a model aircraft or a bridge or building serving special functions—with those that others produce or that measure up to some pre-given external standard (Leont’ev, 1982). We therefore find children and students of all ages who refuse to participate in the ongoing games. Thus, one cultural-historical analysis of mathematics classrooms shows how the fourth-grade student Amélie, after trying for a little while, states that she does not comprehend, and, perhaps more importantly that she will never comprehend (Roth & Walshaw, 2015). Amélie stops working on her task for the remainder of the lesson but for copying the results others achieved onto her own worksheet. The study suggests that the very production of mathematics anxiety is tied to such experiences, because, as Amélie articulates, she anticipates not comprehending in the future, thereby shaping the affective context in which future tasks are performed. That is, these

authors note that repeated failure leads to negative forms of affect, which, in the long run, may have deleterious effects for the affective and cognitive development of the person. The metaphor of the game does not require the goal of winning (Wittgenstein, 1953/1997).

We can go beyond competition in school (Kohn, 1992). We may have to go beyond competition if losing is experienced negatively and if, as Vygotsky asserts, relations with others constitute the ensemble of personality so that constantly losing produces losers. We may have to go beyond competition if it constitutes one practice that inscribes losing and doing so repeatedly all over the classroom. Thus playing with trucks or dolls, exercising for the pleasure that comes with exercising, growing vegetables and herbs, or walking in the forest as a reprieve from everyday life do not require a competition with an associated goal of winning. The particular sense of what it means to participate in a game, where there have to be winners, also comes with the identification of losers. Losing, even if temporarily, does not have to be stimulating. In the classroom from which the episode has been culled, winning, as losing, are integral to the classroom practices that define themselves in terms of a language-game of *game*.

Coda

The nature of the collective work that students and teachers accomplish everyday is irremediably shaped by the societal nature of their relations. The work not only produces outcomes but also their societal relations themselves. Conceptualized by means of Vygotsky's (1994) category experience [pereživanie], which denotes the {person | environment} unity/identity, students not only act in a personally relevant environment but also contribute to the joint work that constitutes this environment. They not only act as subjects but also are subject and subjected to the conditions. In the present study, this society-specific transactional work that produces winners and losers in an educational task organized as a game is the result of a planned curriculum, which, with its outcomes stated prior to enactment, is a form of pedagogical (societal) engineering. Although not intended to do so, the lived curriculum that emerges from

the joint work of students and teachers constitutes a form of pedagogical engineering that also produces the relations that underlie the production and identification of failure and losers.

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