Staging an Educated Self: Linguistic Displays of Schooling among Rural Zambian Children

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This article explores interpretations of schooling as produced by 6–12-year-old children in a rural Zambian community. Applying linguistic-anthropological analyses of their peer interactions, the author discusses symbolic reworkings of schooling and “educatedness” among children frequently labeled as “slow” or “backwards” in the classroom setting and national discourse. This discussion includes the apparent disparities between the tangible and symbolic roles of school in the context of the children’s lifeworlds and future horizons. [schooling, children, peer language socialization, staging educatedness, Zambia]

Introduction

A child’s early encounters with school and its practices may vary broadly, depending on various factors like the individual child, his or her family and socioeconomic background, particular school and classroom environments, as well as the broader regional and socio-cultural context in which the child grows up. In the rural plateaus of Southern Zambia, most children first meet the realm of schooling through interactions with their older school-going peers—siblings, cousins, neighboring friends—whose familiarity with the use of pens, notebooks, uniforms, and academic register they may imitate and gradually acquire (Clemensen 2011).

Schooling in this region tends to be closely associated with local concepts of modernity, ascribing it with powerful and somewhat concealed qualities for many children and their families. Formally educated or “learned” people—*bantu uyiide* in chiTonga, the predominant vernacular—are widely perceived as both morally and intellectually superior, making them alluring objects of study and imitation for children in their interactions with peers. Studying such everyday interactions through close linguistic-ethnographic analysis may reveal children’s experiences and interpretations of schooling in particular linguistic, cultural, and socioeconomic environments—interpretations that may be overlooked by more common scientific approaches in the field of education like classroom observation and interviews. It may also expose the complex role of formal education in a society where schooling only rarely ensures formal employment and where a considerable number of students—even high school graduates—eventually end up working as farmers and housewives like their parents rather than pursuing further education or formal employment in urban areas.

This article explores symbolic practices and concepts of schooling prevailing among a group of 6–12-year-old children all living in Hang’ombe Village, a rural Tonga community in Zambia’s Southern Province. Inspired by the linguistic-anthropological paradigm of *language socialization studies* (Duff and Hornberger 2008; Duranti et al. 2011; Garrett and Baquedano-López 2002; Schieffelin and Ochs 1986), I combine close analysis of sound-recorded and transcribed everyday interactions among the children, collected through extensive ethnographic fieldwork among a select number of families, with analysis of broader structural patterns in the children’s socialization to and participation in a society undergoing concurrent processes of social reproduction and change. In particular, I draw on studies of children’s *peer language socialization* (e.g., Blum-Kulka and Snow 2004; Evaldsson 2007; Goodwin 2006; Goodwin and Kyratzis 2007; Howard 2009a; León 2007;

Minks 2010; Paugh 2012; Reynolds 2008), that is, children's mutual processes of social and linguistic acquisition, reproduction, exploration, and creativity in their interactions with siblings and peers (for an overview of this literature, see Goodwin and Kyratzis 2011). In line with other peer language socialization studies, I illustrate how Hang'ombe children use their peer interactions not only to explore and reproduce the ambiguous social order prevailing around them but also to negotiate and sometimes subvert this order, building alignments and positions for themselves and each other both within and beyond the peer group.

Notable in the children's interaction is an emphasis on social status indexed and negotiated through direct or implicit references to schooling, for example defining oneself or others as educated or learned persons, using technical English or chiTonga terms, counting and spelling loudly, or in other ways employing an academic register in situations and settings that may on the surface have little to do with school. Drawing on observations by a group of language socialization scholars on Swedish adolescents negotiating positions of power and identity at school (e.g., Cekaite and Evaldsson 2008; Evaldsson 2005; Tholander and Aronsson 2002), I define these practices as the children's attempts at *staging* themselves, in this case as formally educated persons possessing powerful knowledge and capability to employ this knowledge appropriately. Continuously positioning both themselves and their peers against a parameter of educatedness, the children reveal the powerful symbolic value of schooling and its representations, reaching well beyond the tangible realm of school.

Language Socialization in Non-Western Societies

Since its initiation by linguistic anthropologists in the 1980s (Ochs and Schieffelin 1984; Schieffelin and Ochs 1986), language socialization studies have been driven by an overall interest in the cultural premises for children's—and other novices'—acquisition of and participation in the social practices, knowledge, and orientations prevailing in particular societies and settings across the world. Unlike earlier ethnographic studies of child socialization (e.g., Mead 1928; Whiting and Whiting 1975), language socialization scholars have shown the basic significance of *language* in this acquisition and participation process, drawing on extensive ethnographic and discourse analytical studies of everyday interactions among children, their caretakers, teachers, and peers in specific sociocultural settings. Scrutinizing and contextualizing children's gradual processes of acquisition and participation in daily life, these scholars have exposed the core aspects of social reproduction, negotiation, and change that shape societies worldwide.

Several language socialization studies have been conducted in formerly colonized societies outside of the West, exploring the day-to-day manifestations and reverberations of complex historical-political phenomena like language shift (e.g., Field 2001; Garrett 2005; Kulick 1992; Makihara 2005; Meek 2007; Paugh 2012), language ideologies (e.g., Atkinson 2003; Dyers 2008; Schieffelin 1994), and second language/multilingual education (e.g., Hornberger and Chick 2001; Howard 2009b; Moore 2004; Watson-Gegeo and Gegeo 1992; Wright 2001). Particularly relevant to the current study is Moore's study of language socialization among Northern Cameroonian children (Moore 2004, 2008), conducted across the socioculturally and linguistically distinct arenas of Fulfulde-speaking homes, Arabic-mediated Qur'anic schools, and French-dominated public primary schools. As part of a more recent trend in language socialization studies, Moore explores the social and linguistic reverberations of children growing up in a multilingual society in which the dominant language may differ across arenas—a factor providing them with complex communicative competencies but also with distinct educational challenges.

None of the above studies focus on children's language socialization in the peer group *per se*, a process that has so far only been sparsely examined in societies outside of the West. Minks' studies in Eastern Nicaragua (Minks 2006, 2008, 2010) depict a group of 7–12-year-old Miskitu children creatively combining features from different linguistic registers associated with a powerful elite, like teacher talk and media discourse, thereby positioning themselves as competent, autonomous actors in the local social order. Reynolds' studies of kin-related Mayan children in Guatemala illustrate how children negotiate and sometimes subvert existing power relations in the peer group through the playful use of different linguistic genres, routines, and registers commonly associated with adult authoritative figures, like the greeting "*Buenos días*" combined with a military salute (Reynolds 2007) and the Spanish reconquest genre *El Desafío* (Reynolds 2010). Paugh's decade-long studies among children on the Caribbean island of Dominica (Paugh 2005, 2012) show children's distinct roles in the ongoing national language shift, a process charged with complex historical issues of identity, power, resistance, and change. Observing the prevailing symbolic division between the vernacular Patwa as an "adult," morally assertive language and English as a "child" language required of obedient students (Paugh 2012: 203–6), the children candidly and creatively defy the sanctioning of Patwa in their peer interactions, investigating powerful social roles while in their own way maintaining and perhaps even revitalizing the vernacular language. Howard's studies of young rural children in northern Thailand (Howard 2007, 2009a)—a society with a different colonial history than the ones above, but also facing rapid linguistic, sociocultural, and economic change—reveal children's distinct role in the ongoing language shift between the vernacular Kam Muang and Standard Thai, positioning themselves against the puritanical demands of both parents and teachers and creating their own syncretic variety in the peer group.

These studies of peer language socialization all illustrate children's distinct roles in processes of societal reproduction and change. Perhaps more than Western societies, non-Western postcolonial societies tend to undergo sociocultural and economic changes in rapid, ambiguous, uneven ways, evoking a particular need for new interpretations of current realities. Children display such interpretations in the relative experimental freedom of the peer group, making it a potent arena for studying both immediate and larger societal themes.

Socialization among Peers

The present study was conducted during nine months of linguistic-ethnographic fieldwork in the village of Hang'ombe in Zambia's southern province in 2008–09 and again during brief follow-up visits in 2010, 2012, and early 2013. With the permission of both parents, children, and the Zambian Ministry of Education, I followed and observed a socioeconomically diverse group of 19 Hang'ombe children between the ages of 6–14 as they moved repeatedly between the arenas central to their daily lives: the homestead, the bush, the garden, the marketplace, the church, and the school. As part of my observations, I collected around 100 digital sound recordings—each with a duration of 1–2 hours—of interactions occurring among the children in these different arenas, mostly while walking or performing different chores. In addition, about 90 hours of recordings were made by some of the children themselves, having consented to carry the recorder while walking, playing, working, or relaxing with their siblings and peers within the context of the household and surrounding fields. All of these recordings were later transcribed, translated, and analyzed in collaboration between my Zambian sociolinguist research assistant and me.

Hang'ombe Village covers a 40km² cluster of 82 homesteads placed in Mapanza District at the lower centre of Zambia's southern province. Referred to in the anthropological

literature also as the *Plateau Tonga*, the large majority of Hang'ombe members are chiTonga-speakers; English remains primarily the language of national matters as displayed in the media, national courts and higher administrative offices, and in particular, formal education (Spitulnik 1998). Homesteads differ largely in size, both in terms of people and possession of land; but children generally grow up among siblings and cousins of varying ages in groups of 3–10, with an average of five children between the age of 0–14 and six adults per household. Several generations are often represented, with siblings, cousins, parents, maternal aunts, uncles, and grandparents cohabitating within the same homestead, mostly consisting of a number of smaller clay-covered houses. Socioeconomic differences in the village exist, primarily centered on sizes of land and livestock, but these differences are relatively minor in the face of immediate challenges of drought, illness, financial restraints, and periodical starvation. The average parental level of completed schooling is around grade 7, while most elders have had little or no access to schooling (author's census 2009).

Practically all families are sustained by farming and cattle herding, and throughout the planting and harvesting seasons from October to early May most children spend much of their days working in the maize fields, assisting their parents and older family members. As in many parts of rural Africa, children play a central role in the sustenance of households from around the age of five (Nsamenang 2008), by which they are gradually introduced to chores like cattle herding for boys and various household chores like sweeping, fetching water, and tending to younger siblings for girls. With parents often busy in the fields, at the market, and at home, this introduction is often performed and monitored by children's older peers—siblings and cousins living in the same homestead—who generally play a crucial role in their mutual socialization, both socially, linguistically, and in terms of physical chores. Spending most of their waking hours together, the peer group thus serves as a central social and linguistic matrix for children, allowing them to explore and experiment with the various issues, practices, and norms presented to them in daily life.

The Ambiguous Enterprise of School

Along with their household chores, the vast majority of Hang'ombe's 6- to 12-year-old children frequent Bwasanu Basic School, a public school hosting around 750 children in the township nearby. As in most parts of the world, schooling in Zambia is widely associated with modern civilization, moral authority, and respect. It may have lost some of its former elitist renown, following the extensive spread of government-subsidized (primary) schools across the country in the past decades, but it remains invested with hopes of great honor and prosperity for children, youngsters, and their families in rural and urban areas alike (Boesen 2000; Serpell 1993; Tranberg Hansen and Dalsgaard 2008). Such hopes are warranted by the political discourse prevailing among both national and international stakeholders—for example the United Nation's 2015 Millennium Goals (UN 2000)—claiming that school intrinsically leads to social mobility and increased quality of life. With the latest national school reform, "Educating our future" (Zambian Ministry of Education 1996), school is now officially free of charge from grades 1 to 7, increasing national enrollment numbers quite drastically in the past 15 years (UNESCO 2012).

Both among Hang'ombe children and many of the adults surrounding them, however, I found a notable divide between the dreams and concerns invested in the mythology of formal education, on one hand, and the responses to the more tangible demands of the local school, on the other. Drawing on their own experiences as subsistence farmers, and faced with the basic challenges of rural life like illness, poverty, and fluctuating harvest results, most parents adopt a pragmatic approach to schooling, generally giving higher

priority to children's work performance in the household and fields than at school. Apart from the urgency of household chores, this priority might also be due to the continued failure of the national school system to ensure further education and employment to generations of young Zambians (Boesen 2000; Hamusunga 2012; Serpell 1993). Access to secondary and further education remains sparse, and paid jobs may be hard to obtain even with a high school diploma in hand. While the school offers alluring promises of wealth and status to both children and their extended families, it also entails the risk of disappointment and loss.

Most parents thus encourage children's schooling for the first 5–7 years, finding tangible relevance in children's acquisition of basic academic skills in literacy, math, English, and home economics. Having passed the grade 7 exam is considered an asset in terms of eligibility for marriage of both girls and boys, ascribing both the child and his or her family with honorable status in the wider community. Children's pursuit of further grade levels, however, is often discouraged by parents, especially for girls whose ideal adult role is mostly seen as that of mother and housewife. Though they might have secret or pronounced aspirations of further education and employment, about 60 percent of Hang'ombe girls drop out of school prior to reaching grade 9, mostly due to pregnancy and/or increased obligations in the household like in the case of the death of a parent (author's census 2009). During my fieldwork in 2008–09, only 12 percent of girls between 18 and 22 years of age—including daughters no longer living in the village—had completed grade 12. Boys tended to reach slightly higher levels of schooling, with 55 percent of 22-year-old Hang'ombe boys having passed their grade 9 exam by January 2009 and about 20 percent of them having completed grade 12. While the social pressure of early marriage and parenthood might be lighter, expectations of financial independency seemed to create an equal counterweight against the continued schooling of Hang'ombe boys.

Mastering the Register of School

Complying with the needs and demands of their parents and older family members, most Hang'ombe children spend considerably more time working in the household than studying or preparing for school. This reflects in their performance at school, where they often appear quiet, distracted, and subdued in class. When asked, teachers would categorize children from Hang'ombe homes as "quiet," "slow," or "backwards," contrasting them with the children living within the township where the educational background of parents is generally higher, and one teacher compared the teaching of such children to "carrying something heavy" due to their alleged inproficiency in English, the main medium of school instruction.

As in other schools in the region, lessons at Bwasanu Basic tend to follow a relatively fixed set of linguistic routines across all subjects and grades. From grade 7 onward, students are expected to display a certain creative independence, but most class interactions follow an initiative-response-evaluation (IRE) structure with either individual students or an entire class giving predetermined answers to the teacher's request. This creates a somewhat monotonous atmosphere in classrooms but also offers students a sense of predictability and comfort in an institution that may in other ways appear alien.

To young rural students like the ones appearing in this study, the academic register introduced to them at Bwasanu differs from what they experience in other arenas in two interrelated ways: in the predominance of English and in the prevalence of abstract scientific categories, both in English and chiTonga, like "domestic animals," "non-living things," "transport," and "personal health." These categories are mostly used to list, describe, and compare different phenomena appearing in an image, text, or in the children's out-of-school lives. Although this register is generally dominated by English,

especially from grade 4 onward, the lack of familiarity that many children may experience in terms of the school's linguistic practices does not only pertain to the use of English—many of the abstract chiTonga terms may be equally unfamiliar to them. Hang'ombe children are rarely asked by parents or other adults to name specific phenomena in either language, especially not phenomena that are physically absent in the room. In terms of English, they may have been exposed to the use of isolated terms during adults' conversations at home or while passing through the township; but few children will have gained close familiarity with the discourses prevailing at school prior to entering grade 1, especially as only very few attend a preschool.

Apart from the emphasis on children's contribution in domestic work and the skepticism towards the long-term value of schooling prevailing in many Hang'ombe homes, teachers' broad conception of Hang'ombe children as slow or backward may be explained by their lack of familiarity with the academic register prevailing at Bwasanu Basic. Throughout the past 30 years in Zambia's educational history, initiatives have shifted to better address the educational needs and prerequisites of children like those from the Hang'ombe Village (for an overview of these initiatives, see Linehan 2005; Williams 2006). Some reports have claimed improved student performance in different parts of rural Zambia (Chemonics 2014; Sampa 2003, 2005), but my class observations and teacher interviews at Bwasanu Basic during 2008–10 indicate that most Hang'ombe children remain quiet and subdued in class, compared to their township counterparts (Clemensen 2010). Contrary to teachers' general interpretation of these children as backward or disinterested in the enterprise of school, however, I often experienced children making direct or implicit references to school outside of the school arena, especially when interacting with their siblings and peers. In the extracts below, taken from the large sample of sound recordings and observations conducted for this study, I investigate how Hang'ombe children use symbolic reworkings of school and its practices in order to position themselves in their immediate social environments.

School's Distinctive Powers

One afternoon in early March 2013, 9-year-old Disteria and her 7-year-old brother Munsanje are walking from their home to the homestead of their cousins, situated about a kilometer away. The siblings have been sent by their mother to pick up rapeseeds from their aunt, reflecting the common practice among Hang'ombe families of sending children for errands to neighboring friends and family members. As they walk along the path, the two siblings chat and joke about various issues. Passing a tree full of bush fruits, Munsanje asks his sister to identify the fruits, probably wanting to know whether they are edible or not. Disteria identifies the fruits as food (*ncilyo*) and starts counting them, demonstrating both the abundance of fruits and her own counting skills, which are soon imitated by young Munsanje. Disteria then brings up the topic of their mutual cousin, 11-year-old Lidea, who lives in a nearby village and visited the children's homestead with her family the previous day. According to Disteria, Lidea claimed to be attending grade 5, even though her cousins both know her as a fourth grader at the local school. This evokes a further discussion among the two siblings, illustrating how schooling may figure as a powerful distinctive category among children:

1. Munsanje [looking at a fruit]:	Ino eci ncilyo nzi, nobantu?
<i>What food is this, you people?</i>
2. Disteria [counting fruits]:	Awa ncilyo, alya ncilyo, one, two, three, four, five . . .
<i>Here is food, here is food, one, two, three, four, five . . .</i>
3. Munsanje [imitating Disteria]:	One, two, three, four, five . . .
<i>One, two, three, four, five . . .</i>
4. Disteria [annoyed]:	Jilo, Lidea wakaamba kuti ngu grade 5.
<i>Yesterday, Lidea said she was in grade 5.</i>

5. Munsanje: Iiyi, mwaiya.
Yes, [that is the grade] she is learning [attending].
6. Disteria: Ulabeja.
It is a lie.
7. Munsanje: Ategwa ni?
She said what?
8. Disteria: Ategwa grade 5.
She said grade 5.
9. Munsanje: Ategwa nzi?
What did she say?
10. Disteria: Ategwa wiiya grade 5.
She said she is in grade 5.
11. Munsanje: Nceamba kuti ulabeja.
I'm saying, it is a lie.
12. Disteria [annoyed]: Ede mbombubo mbaakaamba kuti.
But that is what she was saying.
13. Munsanje: Ambebo mbindakanvwa jilo kumazuba, iiyi.
That is also what I heard yesterday evening, yes.
14. Disteria: Uyeeya kuti ulicenjede kwiinda ndiswe. Ulayanda kulibonesya.
She thinks she is smarter than us. She wants to show off.
15. Munsanje: Iiyi, uyanda kulibonesya.
Yes, she wants to show off.

Whether or not it is actually true, the fact that Disteria accuses Lidea of having lied about attending a higher grade indicates the social significance that Disteria herself associates with schooling and a person's gradual ascent in the institutional hierarchy of school. Along with *age*, schooling appeared as the overriding parameter of social and moral distinction among all the Hang'ombe children I observed, irrespective of their school grades and varying socioeconomic backgrounds. Equal to most adult members, children tend to associate schooling with a certain morality, ascribing increasing moral standards and expectations to children and youngsters as they gradually attend higher school grades. To children like Disteria and Munsanje, Lidea's claim may thus be seen as highly immoral; not only is she—an older child—lying, but she is using the lie to assert herself as intellectually and morally superior to her cousins, both of whom attend lower grades. This is also visible in Disteria's final analysis, claiming that Lidea wants to "show off" (*kulibonesya*, line 14).

Munsanje, however, seems more concerned with pleasing his older sister, Disteria, than with the issue of Lidea. He first confirms that Lidea indeed attends grade 5 (line 5 above), but when Disteria states her dismay against Lidea's claim (6), Munsanje soon aligns himself with her, agreeing that "it is a lie" (11) and that Lidea indeed wants to "show off" (15). Munsanje's continuous attempts to imitate and align himself with his older sister (lines 3, 11, 13, 14) seem to reveal both respect and fear towards her, considering her age and educational status; Disteria is in third grade, while Munsanje has only recently entered first grade. In his relatively young age, 7-year-old Munsanje may be unsure of how to evaluate the claims of an older child like Lidea, and so he chooses to align himself with his older sister, not risking the potential defeat and humiliation of challenging her. Imitating Disteria's counting at the beginning of the extract (lines 2–3), Munsanje manages to show her respect while at the same time displaying his own growing mastery of counting.

To some extent, all the three children appearing in this brief extract may seek to stage themselves as educated persons by employing different social and linguistic strategies in their interactions with peers. Interestingly, Disteria blames her cousin Lidea for "showing off," a social strategy that could equally be applied to Disteria herself. However, the point here may be that by claiming to attend a higher grade, especially in front of peers well

aware of the falseness of this claim, Lidea has exceeded an implicit codex around the social practice of staging educatedness. Recognizing the social strategy underlying Lidea's claim—staging herself as an intellectually and morally superior person—Disteria thus shows her younger brother the social power of academic speech as well as the importance of knowing the boundaries of this power, perhaps especially within the peer group. This educational aspect of the relationship between younger and older peers is also visible in the following example, displaying the interaction among two young cousins.

Asserting Knowledge and Punctuality

Interacting with their peers, children in Hang'ombe are often heard practicing and displaying their ability to *tell time*. Only few of these children have direct access to clocks, perhaps glancing at the cell phones of their parents; but just like older members, a child might use the position of the sun and the regular unfolding of daily routines to estimate the time of day. During school days, children—and parents—must know the approximate time in order to reach school in the township before 8:00 a.m. But though adults tend to pay limited attention to punctuality or the exact measuring of time in most other situations, I frequently heard children announcing the exact time, like 14 hours or 10 hours, and associating these times with their daily routines. These announcements may not be accurate, neither in terms of the time of speaking or conducting the actual chore—but like the use of English words, they might serve to indicate the speaker's level of education, revealing his or her ability to decode and categorize the world accordingly. In the brief interaction below, 8-year-old Ines asks her 7-year-old sister Miyoba to escort her to the well to draw water. Miyoba agrees to come, but then asks her older sister *when* she might go to the well; a question indicating, but not insisting on, a request for an exact time:

1. Ines [to Miyoba]:	Ino ambebo uyoondigwasya [ndaakwiinka kuteka meenda]?
<i>Will you help me also [when I go to draw water]?</i>
2. Miyoba:	Iiyi. Ino wiinka lili?
<i>Yes. When are you going?</i>
3. Ines [insecurely]:	Ccita. . . . Lino ngu 14 hours.
<i>I don't know. . . . It is now 14 hours.</i>
4. Miyoba [confidently]:	Mbuleeno? Iiyi, ngu 14 hours.
<i>Now? Yes, it is 14 hours.</i>
5. Ines [insecurely]:	Cakali ciindi nzi jilo nimwakali kuyooteka meenda?
<i>What time was it when you went to draw water yesterday?</i>
6. Miyoba:	Cakali 14 hours.
<i>It was 14 hours.</i>
7. Ines:	Ulabeja, kwakali ba five bobile. Cakali 75 hours.
<i>You're lying, the five were two [there were two fives]. It was 75 hours.</i>
8. Miyoba:	Tocizyi. Taakwe 75 hours.
<i>You don't know that. There is no such thing as 75 hours.</i>
9. Ines:	Ndileke endikke ndilamulomba Mududu andigwasye kuteka meenda kuleka zyezyo.
<i>Leave me alone. I will ask Mududu to help me instead.</i>

Miyoba does not respond, and the girls remain quiet for a while after this.

Miyoba's opening question to Ines (2) may be seen as an innocent request to know whether Ines is planning to leave for the well soon—but it can also be read as a challenge on Miyoba's behalf, urging her older sister to state an exact time for her planned enterprise. Ines responds that "it is now 14 hours" (3), displaying her knowledge of time while perhaps indicating that the two of them should leave soon to avoid being late for the preparation of supper. Miyoba confirms this hour (4), showing that she, like her older sister, is well aware of the time. When Ines asks what time Miyoba herself went to the well the previous day (5), Miyoba gives the same reply as Ines did before; "14 hours" (6). Ines, however, rejects this reply, telling her sister she is "lying," that "the five were two," and that it was in fact "75

hours" when Miyoba went to the well (7). This response indicates that Ines—and Miyoba—have access to a digital clock, most likely a cell phone, on which "two fives" may appear (e.g., 1:55 hours). Ines' claim that "it was 75 hours" reveals a certain insecurity in her mastery of the clock, but it also underlines what is actually at stake in this interaction between the two sisters; namely determining which of them is the more educated—and thus, more powerful, intelligent, and so on—in this case based on the possession and display of prestigious school-associated knowledge like the clock and the timely categorization of events. This is also evident in Miyoba's response, "You don't know that" (8), by which she dismisses Ines' suspicion—where after she cuts her older sister down to size, telling her that "There is no such thing as 75 hours" (8). In her final remark, Ines seems to recognize her defeat, telling her younger sister to "leave [her] alone"—and that she will ask Mududu, the girls' 8-year-old cousin, to accompany her to the well instead.

Although no direct references to schooling or education are made, this interaction can be seen as yet another negotiation of power and status between young children, based on their respective staging of school-related knowledge and their attempts to position both themselves and each other in regard to this knowledge. It shows how the announcing of time and other school-based practices may take on new meanings in children's peer interactions—and how these practices can come to serve as powerful performative and representative tools, even in situations that, on the surface, may have little to do with school. In the example above, if only for a short while, 7-year-old Miyoba actually succeeds in defeating her older sister, which is significant in a society where a primarily age-based social hierarchy is maintained with great care by children as well as adults. While the demonstration of punctuality may not concur with the practical circumstances prevailing in most households, talking about time in terms of dates and hours may serve to present oneself as a modern, urban, and educated person.

Distinctions of Language and Class

Perhaps more than any other practice, children associate schooling with the experience and gradual acquisition of *English*—a language they rarely hear outside of the township and the church. When playing by themselves, I often heard children use English or English-sounding words, even if few of them were able to have an actual conversation in English. This appears in the following interaction among five children seated around the kitchen fire, chatting and cooking dinner while their mother/aunt is out in the field. One of the girls, 8-year-old Vera, has just finished preparing a fish for the family supper, while her cousin, 13-year-old Mutinta, and her sister, 12-year-old Maegrin, have chopped greens. The girls' 15-year-old-male cousin Sinyimbwe is also present, as is Vera and Maegrin's 3-year-old brother Jahman:

1. Mutinta [to Vera, mockingly]: Ino Vera walijikide. [to Maegrin] Na, naitwa kuti ndish nzi eyi, Maegrin?
Vera, you have cooked so nicely. What dish is this, Maegrin?
2. Maegrin [in low voice]: Ccita naitwa kuti ni dish nzi eyi.
I don't know what this dish is.
3. Mutinta [laughing]: Boiling system stroke frying.
Boiling system stroke frying.
4. Vera [to Mutinta]: Ino ndime ndali kujika na yawe?
Is it my cooking [you're referring to]?
5. Sinyimbwe [to all]: Taifuya buya, kwiina naifulaya buya boiling ndebe.
She [Vera] did not fry it, she was just boiling it.
6. Mutinta: Ndaamba buya mboibede. Boiling system stroke frying.
I'm just saying how it is. Boiling system stroke frying.
7. Maegrin: Inga mbuli kuti salad yavwula.
There was too much cooking oil.

8. Sinyimbwe: Yabila maningi.
It boiled for a long time.
9. Maegrin: Inga mbuli kuti salad yavwula.
There was too much cooking oil.
10. Jahman: Mutinta, Mutinta!
Mutinta, Mutinta!
11. Mutinta: Vera, kuti babuzyigwa kuti ni method nzi eyi, inga waamba kuti nzi?
Vera, If you are asked about the method you used to cook, what will you say?
12. Vera: Nkuti "kwiina."
I will say "nothing."
13. Sinyimbwe: Nkwaamba kuti "ndijika cikuwa-kuwa."
You can simply say "I cook like a town person."
14. Vera: Nkuti ni "design."
I can say it is a "design."
15. Maegrin [to Mutinta]: Ino kujika kuli "design"?
Is there any "design" in cooking?
16. Mutinta [to Maegrin]: Kuti "design"?
She said it is a "design"?
17. Maegrin: Iyi.
Yes.
18. Mutinta [to Maegrin, mockingly]: Zyacikuwa-cikuwa ezyi nzyizyakwe. Nzyakuli zyacikuwa-cikuwa ezyi? Hee?
This town way of cooking of hers. Where is that town way of cooking from? Huh?

This interaction focuses on Vera's cooking, which Mutinta is mocking as she accidentally fried the fish by adding too much cooking oil to the boiling water. Children often discuss the conduct of different social and work-related practices, observing each other's speech, actions, and personal appearance and evaluating these against the social practices and precepts prevailing around them. In line with the previous examples, the extract above can be seen as an investigation and negotiation among the children, not only of a tangible household practice like cooking, but also of how to *talk* about it, positioning oneself as an educated person. The interaction is led by 13-year-old Mutinta, who appears both linguistically and socially more confident than the others—most likely due to her age, her status as the most highly educated (grade 8), and the fact that she has grown up in the large town of Livingstone, which gives her more regular exposure to English and other town-like practices and lifestyles than her cousins.

Mutinta starts off by making a sarcastic comment to Vera—and her peers—of how Vera has cooked so nicely and asking Vera's 11-year-old sister Maegrin for the name of this unconventional dish (1). Maegrin appears unsure of how to respond and tells Mutinta that she does not "know what this dish is" (2), implicitly acknowledging her cousin's ridicule of Vera. Mutinta then employs the English expression, "boiling system stroke frying" (3), which can be seen as reference to an academic discourse broadly associated with schooling. I frequently heard the English term "system" applied among teachers and other educated people in the area, like a veterinarian talking about the farming system or a social worker telling me about the local family system. Above, Mutinta adds even more complexity to her description of Vera's cooking by comparing the system of boiling with the system of frying, using the English term "stroke" to show the incompatibility between the two cooking practices or systems. Eight-year-old Vera appears familiar with this expression, asking Mutinta (in chiTonga), if she is referring to Vera's cooking (4). Fifteen-year-old Sinyimbwe then steps in and defends his young cousin, telling Mutinta—and the others—how Vera "did not fry it, she was just boiling it" (5). As an early school leaver with a limited

proficiency in English, Sinyimbwe might experience Mutinta's mocking of Vera's cooking as targeted more broadly towards uneducated people like himself. Eleven-year-old Maegrin makes a more matter-of-fact evaluation of Vera's cooking job, stating how there was too much cooking oil (7)—again implicitly aligning herself with her older cousin. Mutinta carries on mocking Vera, repeating her declaration of "boiling system stroke frying" (6) and later posing the sarcastic question: "Vera, if you are asked about the method you used to cook, what will you say?" (11), again evoking an academic discourse, this time by using the English term *method*. Sinyimbwe suggests Vera to answer "I cook like a town person" (13), reflecting the social distinction between town persons (*cikuwa-kuwa*) and villagers (*basiminzi*), one commonly noted by children as well as adults. Even if this distinction may sometimes be used in critiques of the (im)moral practices of people in the township, being referred to as a *cikuwa-kuwa* (literally, a townsman or an urbaner) is usually regarded as a compliment, pointing to the person's wealth and modern manners in terms of clothes, shoes, speech, and the possession of modern items like a cell phone or TV. In line with this, applying cooking oil to one's cooking is generally seen as a sign of wealth and sophistication, and although Vera might have added *too much* cooking oil to the fish pot, compared to prevailing standards, Sinyimbwe reminds his peers of how this might be perceived as better than adding little or no cooking oil at all. Interestingly, both Mutinta and Sinyimbwe thus evokes connotations of urbanity, modernity, and educatedness in their respective attempts to assert both the quality of Vera's cooking and, implicitly, their own status in the group. Vera joins them in this negotiation, suggesting that her cooking is a "design" (14)—an English term that might appear in a casual (chiTonga) conversation among adults but is unlikely to be used neutrally by a young girl like Vera. Rather than elaborating on her cooking job, Vera seems interested in displaying her own proficiency in English, thereby implicitly challenging Mutinta's critique. As a response to this, Maegrin questions Vera's use of this term, asking "Is there any design in cooking?" (15). This question is left unanswered, but Mutinta seems to regain her position at the end of the extract by challenging Sinyimbwe's classification of the cooking as a "town way" (18).

Negotiating Power and Morality

As a last example of children's negotiating and staging of symbolic meanings of school and its practices, the extract below depicts a group of five siblings and cousins playing and talking in the grass fields while looking after the cattle of their respective families. The three oldest boys in the group, 9-year-old Brian, his 6-year-old brother Edson, and their 8-year-old cousin Hantete, are in charge of the cattle. Hantete's siblings, 5-year-old John and 7-year-old Miyoba, have accompanied them to the fields, escaping their household chores for a few hours. For a while, the group has been playing several rounds of *kupwa*, a common game where one has to throw and catch a small rock in the air with one hand while removing other rocks from a small hole in the ground with the other. As we enter the interaction, Edson is upset from just having lost another round of *kupwa* to his cousin Hantete. Edson kicks Hantete's collection of stones and scatters them around, leading Hantete to call him *Bausyi Dumbo* (Grandfather of Dumbo), a common nickname associated with being fat or stupid. This rouses the laughter of the other children, infuriating Edson even more:

1. Hantete [mockingly, to Edson]:

Bausyi Dumbo!
Grandfather of Dumbo!

The other children laugh. Edson is upset and starts beating both Brian and Hantete.

2. Brian [laughing, to Edson]:

Koya uume wakwiita kuti "Bausyi Dumbo" utaumi ndime.
Go beat the one calling you "Bausyi Dumbo," don't beat me.

3. Brian [to all]: Ndaleka kusobana Edson tacizyi kusobana.
I have stopped playing because Edson doesn't know how to play.
- Edson is infuriated by this and continues to punch both Brian and Hantete.
4. Brian [to Edson, angrily]: Nseyandi yawe. Edson nhi! Nhi!
I don't want you [to do this]. Edson, no! No!
5. John [laughing]: Edson tacizyi kusobana . . .
Edson doesn't know how to play . . .
6. Hantete [to Edson]: Hei! Edson . . .
Hey! Edson . . .
- Edson screams, while beating both Hantete and John.
7. John [to Edson, jokingly]: Yebo cinya cako . . .
You piece of shit . . .
8. Brian [to John in adult-like voice]: Mbomutukana nkomuzwa?
Is that how you insult in your house?
- The children laugh at Brian's remark. Hantete starts beating back on Edson.
9. Brian [to Hantete and Edson]: Kwiina kulwana, kamwaambaula buyo.
You shouldn't fight, just speak.
10. Miyoba [agreeing with this]: Tukkopwa buya.
We are being recorded.
- Some seconds pass. Edson stops beating Hantete and sits by himself for a while. Hantete and Brian begin writing with sticks on the ground in front of the children, using humorously exaggerated movements.
11. Hantete [to the others]: Sena wabona bwakulemba?
Have you seen how we write?
12. Brian [holding a stick]: Basa ndiyanda kulemba zyina lya chiDumbo.
Friends, I want to write the name chiDumbo ["the Dumbo"].
- Edson remains seated but is upset by the writing. John and Miyoba are laughing, while Brian and Hantete continue writing in the sand.
13. Edson [angrily, to Brian]: Ndamuuma umwi!
I will beat you!
14. Brian [writing in the sand]: Ngooyu "Dumbo."
Here is [the name] "Dumbo."
15. Edson [to Brian, angrily]: Fuseke!
Go away!
- Edson is about to cry and runs off, while Brian and Hantete continue writing with sticks in the sand.

This interaction centers around the mocking of 6-year-old Edson, led by his older brother Brian and their mutual cousin Hantete, and supported by the laughing and cheering of Hantete's siblings, Miyoba and John. Edson tries to challenge the older boys by beating and screaming at them, but he fails to do so and eventually runs off crying. As it appears, rather than entering a fight with Edson, Brian maintains his position in the peer group through social and linguistic means, repeating the nickname *Bausyi Dumbo* (2) and telling the others how "Edson doesn't know how to play" (3). This expression, "not knowing how to play" (*tacizyi kusobana*), recalls the moral discourses frequently evoked in the discussions of older family members. Having observed the social momentum of such discourses among older members, children test if they might achieve a similar effect if employing them among their peers. Like adults, they risk being scorned for being cocky or acting in conflict with their age, for instance, and thus reflecting the strong age-related hierarchy prevailing among children.

By telling Edson and his peers how Edson doesn't know how to play, 8-year-old Brian, the oldest member of the group, thus positions himself as both an intellectually and morally superior person who, contrary to Edson, does not need to use physical power to assert himself. The same pattern is visible in Brian's later reproof of Hantete and Edson, "You shouldn't fight, just speak" (9), again evoking a common rebuke among parents. Both attempts seem to enhance Brian's dominant status in the group, evoking the laughter and cheering of his surrounding peers, and the alignment of 8-year-old Miyoba,

reminding the others that "We are being recorded" (10). Along with the employment of school-based practices, the use of moral discourse prevailing among parents and other adults often serves as an efficient social strategy for obtaining power and recognition in the peer group; and a successful combination of the two, often practiced by older school-going children toward their younger peers, may be particularly powerful in the peer group.

Such a combination of moral and academic discourse can be seen in the last part of the extract, where Brian and Hantete start making letter-like symbols with sticks in the sand while announcing, "Have you seen how we write?" (11), "Friends, I want to write the name 'chiDumbo' " (12) and "Here is the name 'Dumbo' " (14), still in humorously mocking voices and exaggerated gestures. Although this writing might be shaky and have little actual resemblance with the expression *Bausyi Dumbo*, it appears to infuriate and humiliate Edson even further, now seeing his nickname outlined in grand letters on the ground. Although it remains unspoken, the fact that Brian and Hantete have both started school is likely to play a role in their positioning among their peers, who, apart from Miyoba, are not yet in school. Contrary to the younger children, including Edson, this provides Brian and Hantete with the privilege of both mimicking and mocking the practices of educated persons among their peers, simultaneously staging themselves as educated, ascribing them with status within the larger domain of the household, and as proficient contesters of educatedness as a social parameter of respect, granting them a powerful position in the group.

Conclusion

Asserting the significance of schooling to young children is obviously difficult, as it may manifest in complex ways and to different degrees in various aspects of their lives. As I have shown in this article, language socialization studies offer a sophisticated framework to approach this complexity, combining close ethnographic details on children's symbolic practices with broader societal and institutional issues. By recording and scrutinizing a group of Hang'ombe children interacting in the relative freedom of surveilling adults, I have gained insights into the children's interpretations of schooling, which might be difficult to obtain through more common approaches to education, both in academia and among national and international stakeholders, like classroom observations, interviews, or tests.

Observing the ambivalent role of schooling in society around them, young Hang'ombe children learn that being educated, or rather staging an educated self, is a legitimate and often successful strategy for obtaining recognition and power. They may be labelled as "backwards" or "slow" in the classroom in comparison with their township counterparts, but outside in the fields and courtyards other criteria prevail. As we have seen, this lesson serves as an important asset in the peer and sibling group, where children of varying ages continuously explore and negotiate the social and moral order introduced to them in society.

Such insights into the more subtle reverberations of schooling may be particularly valuable in a postcolonial society like Zambia, where rapid and uneven social and economic changes challenge the handing over of applicable knowledge and symbolic models from older to younger generations, emphasizing the need for new interpretations to be posed by younger members. In terms of the children addressed in this study, these insights may also serve to challenge the stigma widely associated with rural children growing up in so-called illiterate communities, both in southern Zambia and beyond. Detailed knowledge on the discursive practices that prevail among students like those from Hang'ombe children depicted here may be used to inform teachers and school materials in basic education, allowing more vivid interactions to occur in class.

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