



Socializing emotionally and morally appropriate peer group conduct through classroom discourse

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ABSTRACT

Adopting a socioculturally informed perspective on emotions, the present study explores institutional practices for socializing first grade students' emotionally and morally appropriate peer group conduct. The methods adopted combine an ethnographic fieldwork and interaction analyses of language socialization. The study examines teacher-solicited children's reports on peer group events (similar to Sharing time narratives), their design features, and the teachers' evaluative responses in primary school classroom interactions. The analysis shows that event descriptions and narratives were imbued with moral and emotional meanings, constituting the primary discursive site where participants engaged in 'emotion talk' and oriented to a range of (mostly negative) emotions. The teachers inculcated the understanding of emotions as relational phenomena with moral and social consequences. Children participated actively, negotiated and resisted specific versions of events and their moral and emotional consequences. In all, the study shows that these discursive practices served as multifaceted socializing sites for (i) learning how to evaluate the moral aspects of actions and emotions; (ii) practicing how to discursively present oneself as a morally responsible person.

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1. Introduction

Classrooms are organized around a range of (socioculturally specific) cognitive, moral, and affective assumptions and values, constituting social arenas in which children are evaluated both as academic students and as moral actors (Wortham, 2006). Socializing children into morally and emotionally appropriate and normatively valued conduct – solidarity, being able to act in the interest of others, and understanding each other's situation – is a significant part of teachers' institutional responsibilities, reflecting the wider societal notions of sociality and personhood (Swedish National Curriculum, 2011). Important to our understanding of how these educational and institutional tasks can be accomplished is the social perspective on emotions and morality (Goodwin and Goodwin, 2000; Ochs, 1988; Parrott, 2003), according to which emotions not only have a psychological, physiological, and cognitive basis, but are also shaped and constrained by cultural norms, beliefs, and values. Language and other semiotic resources constitute a mediating tool through which such emotion socialization takes place, and emotions involve a cluster of rights, duties, and obligations by reference to social and moral standards of particular social and cultural settings (Buttny, 1993).

Thus far, however, it is young children's emotion socialization in the family and in close relations that has received considerable attention (Clancy, 1999; Dunn, 2003; Ochs, 1988). How educational institutions deal with and socialize children's

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emotional and moral conduct during later years is, however, relatively uncharted territory (but see Cekaite, 2012a; Howard, 2009; Lo, 2009).

The present study explores moral and emotion socialization of first grade students in a primary school classroom in Sweden. It examines recurrent discursive practices, here called ‘recess talk’ (resembling ‘sharing time’ narrative practices, Cazden, 2001), where individual children were invited to recount their experiences and peer group events from recess, and the teachers’ responded with appreciation or criticism as well as evaluation of the children’s and peer group’s conduct. The research questions asked are: (1) what constitutes moral and affective framing of the reported events; (2) what are the language-mediated and other semiotic forms (grammatical and discursive structures, emotion labels) the teachers and students deploy to negotiate norms and expectations concerning the children’s morally and emotionally appropriate conduct in the peer group; (3) how are the children’s negative emotions and untoward behaviour conceptualized and socialized by the teachers within the emotional and moral landscape of a Swedish educational setting (e.g., who is allowed to feel what, when and why). The study pays particular attention to the discursive features that characterize the students’ active participation in narrative practices through which the boundaries of their morally and emotionally appropriate behaviour (vis-à-vis each other) are drawn and negotiated.

2. Theoretical perspective and background research

The present analysis of moral and emotion socialization through language/discursive practices in the context of education incorporates insights from several practice-oriented approaches through an integrative framework of language socialization. It combines theoretical approaches to learning (Engeström, 1987; Rogoff, 2003; Vygotsky, 1978) and society (Bourdieu, 1977) that share a view of semiotic practices (including language and other resources) as means for learning/development, and as constitutive of social actions and societal processes. Accordingly, humans’ formation of identities is located in social interaction, dynamically mediating between thought and language or “living speech” (Vygotsky, 1978: 276). Here, through repeated associations with particular situations of use, semiotic resources gain their social and cultural meanings (Howard, 2009). Practice theory within social science has also underscored that educational settings serve as contexts for formal socialization, where societal and institutional norms and values are inculcated, including the particular ways of using language (Bourdieu, 1977; Sanchez & Orellana, 2006).

Language socialization combines these perspectives in arguing that children are socialized and become competent members of their communities “through the use of language” as they are socialized to use language. Thus, moral and emotion socialization constitute an intrinsic and common feature of everyday encounters, in that membership in a community requires recognition of and adherence to moral standards concerning what is expected in particular situations, roles and relations (Ochs & Capps, 2001). Everyday discursive practices thereby constitute a site where the “local values, ideologies, patterns of social organization and cultural preferences” as well as notions of morality and personhood are inscribed, providing a link to broader societal ideologies and processes (Ochs & Schieffelin, 2012: 10).

2.1. Emotions, language, and socialization

The view of emotions as individual, subjective and biological as well as culturally universal phenomena is rather predominant in psychological and neurobiological approaches (Jenkins, Oatley, & Stein, 1998). Although some of the prevalent linguistic approaches to emotions, such as the cognitive-semantic perspective (Wierzbicka, 1996), do acknowledge culturally specific features of emotion terms, this perspective, rather than exploring the meanings that are actualized in situations of use (i.e., the meanings they have for the members of particular communities of practice, or the interactional purposes of their use), takes a decontextualized semantic view, categorizing emotion terms according to basic lexical and cognitive universals.

In contrast, the socially oriented approaches have outlined various ways in which language practices are permeated with emotions by focusing in particular on adults’ socialization of young children regarding how one is to interpret and display culturally relevant emotions (see studies on everyday social interactions in families and among close relations, Clancy, 1999; Ochs, 1988). One of the significant features of discursive practices concerns their potential for ‘hypercognizing’ emotions (ascription of particular meanings), in that “in hearing what we ourselves and others say about emotions, we come to understand better (or create) our goals and other perceptions” (Lutz, 1987: 301). This perspective has identified several discursive sites (narratives, emotion talk, assessments) that “contextualize and connect initially undifferentiated feelings into highly differentiated social situations” (Bruner, 1986: 116) and therefore are especially pertinent for children’s emotional development. Several studies conducted in families with 2- to 5-year-old children have shown that, by hearing adult narratives, young children are exposed to cultural knowledge about how to interpret and narratively construct their identities and emotions vis-à-vis particular life experiences, including collective normative perspectives on experiences and actions (Miller, Potts, Fung, Hoogstra, & Mintz, 1989; Ochs and Capps, 2001). As demonstrated by psychological studies on 2- to 4-year-olds’ conversational narratives, emotionally charged reports and stories are closely related to children’s social concerns and have a ‘real-world’ connection; children initiate narratives in situations characterized by negative and problematic events to pursue various social-relational goals (Dunn, 2003).

Yet another way in which emotions and children’s discursive participation are connected involves so-called ‘emotion talk’, where the management of emotions gains explicit attention in talk. Studies taking a situated perspective in

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