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Literacy and Cultural Context: A Lesson from the Amish

Andrea R. Fishman

One clear, frost-edged January Sunday night, two families gathered for supper and an evening's entertainment. One family—mine—consisted of a lawyer, a teacher, and their twelve-year-old son; the other family—the Fishers—consisted of Eli and Anna, a dairy farmer and his wife, and their five children, ranging in age from six to seventeen. After supper in the Fisher's large farm kitchen, warmed by a woodstove and redolent with the fragrances of chicken corn soup, homemade bread, and freshly baked apples, the table was cleared and an additional smaller one set up to accommodate games of Scrabble, double Dutch solitaire, and dominoes. As most of us began to play, adults and children randomly mixed, Eli Fisher, Sr. settled into his brown leather recliner with the newspaper, while six-year-old Eli Jr. plopped on the corner of the couch nearest his father with a book.

Fifteen or twenty minutes later, I heard Eli Sr. ask his son, "Where are your new books?" referring to a set of outgrown Walt Disney books we had brought for little Eli and his seven-year-old brother. Eli pointed to a stack of brightly colored volumes on the floor from which his father chose *Lambert, the Sheepish Lion*. As Eli Jr. climbed onto the arm of the recliner and snuggled against his father, Eli Sr. began reading the book out loud in a voice so commandingly dramatic that soon everyone was listening to the story instead of playing their separate games. Broadly portraying both the roles of Lambert and his lioness mother and laughing heartily at the antics of the cub who preferred cavorting with the sheep to stalking with the lions, Eli held his enlarged audience throughout the rest of the story.

As most of us returned to our games when he finished reading, Eli asked of anyone and everyone, "Where's the 'Dairy'?" Daniel, the Fishers' teenage son, left his game and walked toward the couch. "It's in here," he said, rummaging through the newspapers and magazines stacked in the rack beside the couch until he found a thick newsletter called *Dairy World*, published by the Independent Buyers Association to which Eli belonged.

Eli leafed through the publication, standing and walking over to the woodstove as he did. Leaning against the stove, he began reading aloud without preface. All conversation stopped as everyone once again attended to Eli's loudly expressive reading voice. "A farmer was driving his wagon down the road. On the back was a sign which read: 'Experimental Vehicle. Runs on oats and hay.

Do not step in exhaust.” Everyone laughed, including Eli, who then read the remaining jokes on the humor page to his attentive audience. All our games forgotten, we shared the best and the worst riddles and jokes we could remember until it was time for bed.

Occasions like this one occur in many homes and have recently attracted the interest of family literacy researchers (Heath 1983; Taylor 1983; Wells 1986). The scene at the Fishers could have been the scene in any home where parents value reading and writing and want their children to value them as well. It would not be surprising if Eli and Anna, like other literacy-oriented parents, read bedtime stories to their children, helped with their homework, and encouraged them to attain high school diplomas, if not college degrees. But Eli and Anna do none of these things: they read no bedtime stories, they are annoyed if their children bring schoolwork home, and they expect their children to go only as far in school as they did themselves, as far as the eighth grade.

So although Eli and Anna appeared on that Sunday night to be ideal literacy parents, they may not be according to commonly described standards, and one significant factor accounts for their variations from the supposed ideal: Eli and Anna are not mainstream Americans but are Old Order Amish, raising their family according to Old Order tradition and belief. The Sunday night gathering described here took place by the light of gas lamps in a house without radio, stereo, television, or any other electrical contrivance. Bedtime in that house is more often marked by singing or silence than reading. Schoolwork rarely enters there because household, field, and barn chores matter more. And the Fisher children’s studying is done in a one-room, eight-grade, Old Order school taught by an Old Order woman who attended the same kind of school herself. So while Eli Jr., like his siblings, is learning the necessity and value of literacy, what “literacy” means to him and the ways in which he learns it may differ significantly from what it means and how it’s transmitted to many mainstream individuals, differing in both obvious and subtle ways, just as Eli’s world differs from theirs both obviously and subtly.

Amish Reading

As suggested earlier, Eli Jr. lives in a house replete with print, from the kitchen bulletin board (displaying recently received greeting cards, public sale notices, and sayings copied or clipped from various sources) to the built-in bookcases in the playroom, to the tables and magazine rack in the living room. There are children’s classics, including *Black Beauty*, *Heidi*, the Hardy Boys and the “Little House” series, and children’s magazines, including *Ranger Rick*, *Country Kids*, and *Young Pilot*. There are local newspapers, shoppers’ guides, and other adult periodicals, including *Farm Journal* and *Dairy World*. And there are books of children’s Bible stories, copies of the King James Version of the bible,

and inspirational volumes like *Tortured for Christ*, *Faith Despite the KGB*, and *In My Father's House*, none of which mark the Fisher's home as notably different from many other Christian Americans'.

Yet there are differences, easily overlooked by a casual observer but central to the life of the family and their definition of literacy. One almost invisible difference is the sources of these materials. Eli and Anna attempt to carefully control the reading material that enters their home (often wishing they could control the mail, especially that addressed to Occupant). Anna buys books primarily from a local Christian bookstore and from an Amish-operated dry goods store, both of which she trusts not to stock objectionable material. When she sees potentially interesting books in other places—in the drug store, the book-and-card shop, or at a yard sale—she uses the publisher's name as a guide to acceptable content. Relatives and friends close to the family also supply appropriate titles both as gifts and recommendations, which Anna trusts and often chooses to follow up.

Another slightly more visible difference comes in the form of other books and periodicals around the house which would not be found in many mainstream, farm, or Christian homes. Along with the local newspaper in the rack alongside the couch are issues of "*Die Botschaft*," "A Weekly Newspaper Serving Old Order Amish Communities Everywhere," to which both Anna and her father contribute regularly as "scribes" from their individual church districts. On the desk is a copy of *The Amish Directory of the Lancaster County Family, extending to Chester, York, Lebanon, Dauphin, Montour, Lycoming, Clinton, Centre, Franklin, Cumberland, Adams Counties of Pennsylvania and St. Mary's Couty, Maryland*, which lists all Amish individuals living in those areas alphabetically by nuclear family groups, giving crucial address and family information along with maps of the eighty-seven church districts showing both where families live and where schools are located.

On top of the breakfront in the sitting area are copies of song books, all in German: *Kinder-Lieder*, and *Does Neue Kinder-Lieder*, both for children, *Gesang-Buch* for young people and adults, and the *Ausbund*, the hymnal used at church, which is a collection of hymns written by tortured and imprisoned sixteenth-century Anabaptists about their experiences and their faith. Kept with the song books is a German edition of the Bible and a copy of the *Martyrs Mirror*, an oversize, weighty tome full of graphic descriptions (in English) of the tortured deaths of early Anabaptists illustrated by black-and-white woodcut prints.

Despite what may seem to be the esoteric nature of these texts, none remain in their special places gathering dust, for all are used regularly, each reinforcing in a characteristic way the Amish definition of literacy and each facilitating Eli Jr.'s image of himself as literate. Because singing is central to Amish religious observance and expression, the song books are used frequently by all members of the family. The children began to learn songs as soon as they were able to

imitate others' singing, and in the Fisher family, each child received his or her own copy of the children's song book as a gift from Anna's parents. The Amish "young folks" (people between the ages of sixteen and their early twenties), including the Fisher's eldest, Sarah, gather biweekly for "singings" of their own, and the adult male leaders of the congregation, including Eli Sr., meet periodically for "practice singings" at which they rehearse to achieve the vocal unity necessary to lead and support the ritualized singing of their church service.

Because singing requires knowing what is in the text, and Amish singing particularly requires knowing how to interpret the text exactly as everyone else does in terms of pacing, intonation, inflection, and volume to create the unified single voice of the faithful, it represents a kind of reading particularly important to the community, a kind that must be mastered to be considered literate. Yet because singing may mean holding the text and following the words from memory or from others' rendition, children Eli's age or younger may participate, appearing and feeling as literate as anyone else.

The German Bible and the *Martyrs Mirror*, the two other esoteric texts, also function similarly. Though only the older Fishers read that bible, they do so as regularly as they read the English version, so they can "take the two together" for their understanding and share that understanding with their children, who then know what the text says. It is the older Fishers, too, who read the *Martyrs Mirror*, but it is Eli Sr. who usually reads it aloud during family devotions, so Anna and the children participate similarly in that experience, all as listeners.

While it may seem easier to accept personal variant definitions of reading in shared communal situations, Eli Jr.'s participation was equally welcome and equally effective in individual communal reading, too. When individual oral reading was clearly text-bound, as it is during family devotions, Eli was always helped to participate in ways similar to his brothers' and sisters', making him a reader then, too. When all the Fishers took turns reading the Bible aloud, someone would read a verse slowly, pausing every few words, so Eli Jr. could repeat what was said and thereby take his turn in the rotation. (Eli and Anna insisted that the children read aloud for two reasons: "so we can hear what they're saying" and because "they keep it a lot better than if we read it," and they saw no reason for little Eli not to practice or not to "keep" what was read.)

When the older children were assigned Bible verses or *Ausbund* hymn stanzas to memorize, Eli Jr. was given the same one as Amos, the sibling closest in age, their assignment shorter and containing less complex vocabulary than the one the older children got. Yet Amos and Eli would practice their verse together just as the older children did, and take their turns reciting as the older children did, Eli again able to participate along with everyone else.

Because oral reading as modeled by Eli Sr. is often imitated by others, Eli Jr. has always shared his books by telling what he sees or knows about them. No one ever told him that telling isn't the same as reading even though they may look alike, so Eli always seemed like a reader to others and felt like a reader

himself. When everyone else sat reading or playing reading-involved games in the living room after supper or on Sunday afternoons, Eli did the same, to no one's surprise, to everyone's delight, and with universal, though often tacit, welcome and approval. When the other children received books as birthday and Christmas presents, Eli received them too. And when he realized at age six that both of his brothers had magazine subscriptions of their own, Eli asked for and got one as well. Eli never saw his own reading as anything other than real; he saw it as neither make-believe nor bogus, and neither did anyone else. So despite the fact that before he went to school Eli Jr. could not read according to some definitions, he always could according to his family's and his own.

Amish Writing

Just as all the Fishers read, so they all write, and just as Eli was enabled to define reading in a way that made him an Amish reader, so he could define writing in a way that made him an Amish writer. Letter writing has always been a primary family activity and one central to the Amish community. Anna writes weekly to "*Die Botschaft*." She, Eli, and Sarah all participate in circle letters (i.e., letters written by self-selected groups of friends, relatives, former schoolmates, members of the same occupation, or any other shared interest or background group, which circulated from one person to the next, each adding a page and removing those he or she last wrote). And the other three children all write with some regularity to cousins in other Amish settlements. Yet no matter who is writing to whom, their letters follow the same consistently modelled Amish format, beginning with "Greetings . . ." (of love, of Christian love, in the name of Jesus, or something similar), moving to recent weather conditions, to family and/or community news of note (births, deaths, marriages, illnesses, accidents, visitors, or gatherings), ending with a good-bye and often a philosophical or religious thought. I've never seen anyone in the community instructed to write this way, but in the Fisher family, letters received and even letters written are often read out loud, and though this oral sharing is done for informative rather than instructive purposes, it provides an implicit model for everyone to follow.

With all the other family members writing letters, reading them out loud, and orally sharing those they received, Eli wanted to write and receive letters, too, and no one said he couldn't. When he was very young, he dictated his messages to Sarah and drew pictures to accompany what she had put in print for him. Then, even before he started school, Eli began copying the dictated messages Sarah recorded, so the letters would be in his handwriting as the drawings were.

Greeting cards, like letters, help unite the far-flung Amish community, and like letters, the Fisher children compose their own, these according to the model provided by professional cards. Using construction paper, crayons and pencils, and a supply of previously received cards that Anna saves in a box in

her desk, some of the children cut out pictures from the professional cards and write their own verses and messages; some cut out or copy the text from the professional cards; and some use the professional cards as inspiration for pictures and verses of their own, making this an activity Eli could share as soon as he was old enough to wield the tools.

Other forms of writing also occur in the Fisher household for all to see and use. Grocery lists, bulletin board reminders, and bedtime notes from children to absent parents are all part of Eli's life to a greater or lesser extent, and his preschool writing and drawing have adorned the refrigerator along with the school papers of his brothers and sisters.

In addition there are writing-involved games—including Scrabble and Boggle—in which everyone participates as the Fishers revise the rules to suit their cooperative social model as well as their definition of literacy. In any game at the Fishers, the oldest person or people playing may assist the younger ones. No question of fairness arises unless only some players go unaided. Older players, too, may receive help from other players or onlookers. Score is always kept, and while some moves are ruled illegal (nonexistent, misspelled, Dutch, or German words, for instance), age or aid received neither bars nor assures a winner. Eli Jr., therefore, has always played these games as well as anyone else.

Literacy as a Force, a Power in the Amish World

Obviously, Eli Jr. learned a great deal about literacy from all these preschool experiences, but what he learned went far beyond academic “readiness” lessons in the recognition of the top-down and left-right orientation of print, the sounds and structures of narrative and other discourse forms, the ability to hold and manipulate a pencil, or early letter and word recognition. More importantly, Eli learned that literacy is a force in the world—his world—which imparts power to all those who possess it. He could see for himself that reading and writing enable people as old as his parents and as young as his siblings to fully participate in the world in which they live. In fact, it might have seemed to him that to be an Amishman, one must read and write, and to be a Fisher, one must read and write as well.

So even before the age of six Eli began to recognize and acquire the power of literacy, using it himself to affiliate with the larger Amish world and to identify himself as an Amishman, a Fisher, a boy, and Eli Fisher, Jr. Because being Amish is the central organizing fact of the Fisher family's life, affiliating with the group by being appropriately Amish became important for Eli virtually from the time he was born. Affiliation through Amish-appropriate clothes, behavior, and language came “naturally” first, with affiliation through literacy becoming an implicitly logical next step. Reading and learning from the Bible, the song books, and the *Martyrs Mirror* allowed Eli to affiliate with the group in primarily religious ways while reading and learning the news from “*Die Bot-*

schaf” allowed more social affiliation, as did writing letters and cards to Amish relatives in distant places.

Like all small children, however, Eli had perhaps more powerful interest in identifying with his immediate family group. Being one of the Fishers meant participating not only in family religious activity but in leisure time reading, writing, and game playing as well. Being his father’s son meant reading when Dad read or even what Dad read, while being his brothers’ brother meant taking an interest in the latest Hardy Boys’ adventure and having a magazine subscription that came for him, too.

While these kinds of affiliation and identification may seem to submerge any burgeoning sense of individual identity (which, in fact, is what Amish affiliation and identification do at their most effective), they do allow some room for even a preschooler to use literacy for self-identification in addition to the group variety. Drawing original pictures for display on the refrigerator door alongside his siblings’ school papers made Eli’s a recognizable presence, and developing a recognizable and even stylized signature allowed him to literally leave his mark on the world. Having books of his own—whether featuring Mickey Mouse or Lambert—made him a literacy-identified individual, separating him from Daniel and the Hardy Boys books and from Amos and his nature books. Even more aggressively, requesting and receiving his own magazine by subscription said “this is who I am.” (When *Country Kids* first started arriving, it was hard to determine whether the magazine or its mailing label addressed to Eli Fisher Jr. was the more important text to Eli.)

What enabled Eli to recognize all these ways of defining and asserting himself as both individual and Amishman was neither direct instruction nor insistence from someone else, however. Rather it was the ability that all children have long before they can read and write text, the ability, as Friere puts it, “to read the world.” “It is possible,” Friere asserts, “to view objects and experiences as texts, words, and letters and to see the growing awareness of the world as a kind of reading through which the self learns and changes” (p. 6). Eli Jr. clearly illustrates this understanding of how children perceive and comprehend the sometimes seemingly elusive text of their lives. I suspect that adults—particularly mainstream adults who were trained to think of learning as primarily the result of direct teaching—forget the implicit but powerful pedagogy of life itself. Yet that is the most important kind of teaching and learning there is, especially in Amish society where it happens consciously and intentionally.

The text of Amish life is writ large—forthrightly, consistently, and coherently—with few subtexts, footnotes, or variorums to complicate interpretation. All social situations—from the family dinner table to a grandparents’ living room to a quilt sale to a school parents’ meeting to a church service—are formally or informally organized according to the obvious categories of sex and age, which facilitates individual silent reading of the social text along and between the lines. Young children watch and imitate older children just as older children imitate adults who are following the gender patterns of their elders, all

without being so instructed. Whether learning to fold their hands and lower their eyes during the silent grace before meals, to twist and pull ripe tomatoes or ears of corn in the garden, or to take out a book and read after supper, Amish children are rarely told what to do. Not only does reading the world precede reading the word for them as a natural human social consequence, but this kind of social literacy is an Amish cultural imperative transcending both particular texts and contexts and incorporating print literacy into their lives according to their society's own needs and ends.

When Eli Jr. began school, therefore, he was both academically and socially ready to begin. To smooth the transition from home to school, Eli's teacher—like most in Old Order schools—held a “preschool day” in the spring preceding his entry to first grade. On that day, Eli and Mary, the two prospective first graders in Meadow Brook School's district, came to be initiated as “scholars.” Verna, their teacher, had moved the two current first graders to other seats, clearing the two desks immediately in front of hers for the newcomers, and all that day Mary and Eli sat in the first-grade seats, had “classes,” and did seatwork like all the other children. They seemed to know they were expected to follow the rules, to do what they saw others doing, to practice being “scholars,” and Verna reinforced that notion, treating those two little differently than she treated the others. Though her tone with them was often less strident, her movements less abrupt, and her language sometimes Dutch, Verna conducted markedly similar lessons, focusing on what could be called reading and writing readiness.

To begin one lesson, “Let's talk about bunnies,” she instructed, nodding her head toward the two little children, indicating that they should stand beside her desk. She showed them pictures of rabbits, with the word “bunnies” and the number depicted appearing in word and numeral on each. After going through the pictures, saying “three bunnies,” “four bunnies,” and having the children repeat, she asked three questions and got three choral answers, all drawn from the text of the children's lives.

Q: Do bunnies like carrots?

A: Yes.

Q: Do they like lettuce?

A: Yes.

Q: Do they sometime's get in mother's garden?

A: Yes.

Were it not for some enthusiastic head shaking, Eli and Mary could have been fully matriculated students.

When she was ready to assign seatwork, Verna gave the preschoolers pictures of bunnies to color and asked, “What do we do first? Color or write our names?” (the latter a skill they had been practicing by copying printed models Verna prepared).

“Write our names,” the pair chorused.

“Yes, we always write our names first. Go back to your desk, write your name, then color the picture. Do nothing on the back of the paper.” And the children did exactly that, doing “what we do” precisely “the way we do it.”

Verna also conducted what she called a reading class for the two preschoolers during which they sat, and she held an open picture book facing them. Talking about the picture, Verna made simple statements identifying different aspects of and actions in the illustration. After each statement Verna paused and the children repeated exactly what she had said. The oral text accompanying one picture said:

Sally is eating chips and watching TV.

Sally has a red fish.

Sally has spilled the chips.

After reading the text this way, the children answered questions about it, in unison unless Verna called on one by name.

Q: What does Sally have?

A: A fish.

Q: What color is the fish?

A: Red.

Q: Did Sally spill the chips?

A: Yes.

Q: Did the cat eat the chips?

A: Yes.

While the content of this lesson seems incongruous, the form and conduct fit the Meadow Brook model perfectly. Precise recall and “yeses” are all the questions demand. Even the last question, while not covered in the reading, requires recognition of only what happens in the picture.

What happened in Meadow Brook School that day—and what would happen in the eight school years to follow—reinforced, extended, and rarely contradicted what Eli already knew about literacy. Reading and writing at school allowed him to further affiliate and identify himself as an individual within and apart from it. While his teacher occasionally gave direct instructions, they tended to be for never-before-seen-or-experienced activities; otherwise, Eli (and Mary) knew to follow the behavioral and attitudinal lead of the older children and to look to them for assistance and support as often as—or perhaps more often than—to the teacher. In other words, reading the school world came as naturally to these children as reading the world anywhere else, and the message in that text was the same.

Amish Literacy Versus Mainstream School Literacy

In addition to simply encouraging or requiring literacy, however, Meadow Brook reinforced and extended the same definition of literacy Eli had absorbed

at home, offering coherence that precluded conflict over what, how, or even whether to read and write. Eli's experience as a Fisher had taught him that reading comes in many forms—secular and religious, silent and oral, individual and communal—and they all “count.” Through his at-home experience, Eli had also learned which other, more specific, less obvious abilities count as reading in his world: (1) the ability to select and manage texts, to be able to find his mother's letter in “*Die Botschaft*” or to find a particular verse in the Bible; (2) the ability to empathize with people in texts and discern the implicit lessons their experiences teach, to empathize with Lambert the lion who taught the possibility of peaceful coexistence, and to empathize with the Anabaptist martyrs who taught the rightness of dying for one's faith; (3) the ability to recall what was read, to remember stories, riddles, and jokes or to memorize Bible and hymn verses; and (4) the ability to synthesize what is read in a single text with what is already known or to synthesize information across texts in Amish-appropriate ways, relating one Bible portion to another or making coherent sense of what is read in children's books, newspapers, and the Bible about how people should relate to each other.

When Eli got to school, he found a similar definition of reading in operation. He and Mary were helped to select and manage text. Their attention was directed toward what mattered in the text and away from what did not. They were helped to discover the single right answer to every question, and they had only to recall information without interpreting or extending it in any significant way. And they were expected to empathize with the people in Verna's lunch time oral reading without questioning or hypothesizing about what had happened or what would happen next.

(One important dimension of Amish literacy is not on this list because it is the only one with which Eli had personal experience before entering school and did not encounter at Meadow Brook as a preschooler. This ability—to follow written directions—was something he saw members of his family use however, his mother with cookbooks and business forms, his father with equipment and feed instructions, and his siblings with similar materials. So Eli's ability to recognize the validity and value of following print instructions also began at home and would be extended in school, when he became a full-time student.)

Similarly, before Eli went to school, he knew what counted as reading. He learned at home that being able to write means being able to encode, to copy, to follow format, to choose content, and to list. Encoding—producing legible penmanship, correct spelling, and basic punctuation—was something Sarah modeled for Eli so he could imitate and learn it himself and was something everyone did when playing word games. Copying was what he did with what Sarah provided, but it was also something he and his siblings did when making cards and even his mother did when making small signs for the bulletin board. Following format was a more global variety of copying, recognizing the parts of a card or letter and their order, while choosing content meant making audience-

appropriate decisions often modelled by the content of similar cards or letters. Again, too, this same definition, these same abilities, were all that were required at school as well as at home.

While the dimensions of reading and writing that count at Meadow Brook and elsewhere in Eli's life seem little different from those which count in mainstream situations, it is important to recognize that several mainstream-valued skills are completely absent from the Amish world. Critical reading of the sort touted as particularly important by most people who are mainstream educated or mainstream educators is not valued by the Amish because of its potentially counterproductive or destructive power. Individual analysis and interpretation of text, which may lead to distinct, disparate individual understanding, is neither taught nor modelled anywhere in the community. Even ministers and bishops, who critically interpret biblical text for their congregants do so with an eye not to new, unique, personal understandings but to traditional, commonly accepted ones. The meaning of biblical stories or injunctions may be applied to current situations and problems (an application of the looking-for-the-lesson-in-the-text skill mentioned earlier), but the meaning that is applied never changes.

Similarly, literary appreciation is no more relevant or valued than literary criticism. The ability to recognize personification or imagery, simile or metaphor which counts so much in mainstream English classrooms has no place in Meadow Brook School, for the study of text as object is not valued there. How a writer enables a reader to empathize with his characters matters not; only the ability to empathize does. Text—whether biblical or secular—is not an object but a force acting in the world, and its impact, alone, is what matters.

When it comes to writing too, the existing Amish definition differs in what is absent rather than what is present. While grammar, spelling, and punctuation do count for the Old Order, they do so only to the extent that word order, words, and punctuation must allow readers to read, i.e., they must be recognizable and make sense. If a reader readily understands the intention of an adjective used as an adverb, a singular verb following a plural noun, a sentence fragment, or a compound verb containing a misplaced comma, the Amish do not see these as errors warranting attention, despite the fact that an outside reader might. After all, though such an outsider might happen to read an Amish-written text, few such texts are intended for other than an Amish audience, and all of those intended readers have the same sense of what counts and what doesn't. (I know it is difficult for a conscientious mainstream school graduate to imagine truly believing mechanics don't count; I never thought I would be able to read "*Die Botschaft*" without involuntarily flinching. Over this time, however, I found myself reading for meaning, not errors, and actually became able to disregard mistakes to the point of barely noticing some and not noticing others.)

Also irrelevant in Old Order schools is the third-person formal essay—also known as the five-paragraph theme—so prevalent in mainstream classrooms.

Amish children never learn to write this kind of composition not because they are not college bound but because the third-person-singular point of view assumed by an individual is foreign to this first-person-plural society, with thesis statements, topic sentences, and concepts like coherence, unity, and emphasis similarly alien.

One final distinction separates the Amish definition of literacy from that of many mainstream ones: the absence of originality as a desirable feature. Not only do community constraints limit the number of appropriate topics and forms a writer may use, but original approaches to or applications of those topics and forms is implicitly discouraged by the similarity of models and assignments and by the absence of fiction as an appropriate personal genre. All aspects of community life reward uniformity, so while writing provides an outlet for individual expression and identification, singular creativity stays within community norms.

Issues for Mainstream Curriculum and Instruction in Literacy

For Eli Fisher Jr., then, the definition of literacy he learned at home was consistent with the one he found at school though it differed in several important ways from those of most *Language Arts* readers. But for Eli, like for Freire (1983), “deciphering the word flowed naturally from reading the immediate world” (p. 7), and from reading his world this six year old derived a rather complete implicit definition which told him what literacy is and whether literacy matters. I can’t help but wonder, however, what would have happened had Eli gone to school and been told, explicitly or through more powerful behaviors, that he really didn’t know what counted as reading and writing, that his reading and writing were not real but other unknown or alien varieties were. What would have happened had his quiet imitative behavior made him invisible in the classroom or, worse yet, made his teacher assume he was withdrawn, problematic, or less than bright? What if his work were devalued because it was obviously copied or just unoriginal? What if he had been called on to perform individually in front of the class, to stand up and stand out? Or what if he had been asked to discuss private issues in public? Or to evaluate what he read?

Had any of these things happened, I suspect that Eli would have had to make some difficult choices, choices that would have amounted to choosing between what he had learned—and learned to value—at home and what he seemed expected to learn at school. To conform to his teacher’s demands and values, he would have had to devalue or disavow his parents’—a demand public schools seem to make frequently of children from cultural or socioeconomic groups differing from their teachers’ or their schools’, a demand that seems unfair, uncalled for, and unnecessary, not to mention counterproductive and destructive.

Eli Fisher’s experience suggests, therefore, that those of us who deal with children unlike ourselves need to see our classrooms and our students differ-

ently than we may have in the past. We need to realize that students, even first graders, have been reading the world—if not the word—for at least five, six, or seven years and come to school not devoid of knowledge and values but with a clear sense of what their world demands and requires, including what, whether, and how to read and write, though their understandings may differ significantly from our own. We need to realize that our role may not be to prepare our students to enter mainstream society but rather to help them—and perhaps their parents—see what mainstream society offers and what it takes away, what they may gain by assimilating and what they may lose in that process. Through understanding their worlds, their definitions of literacy, and their dilemmas, we will not only better help them make important literacy-related decisions but better help ourselves do the same.

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Memberships Available in NCTE Committee on Publishers and English Teachers

A limited number of memberships in NCTE's Committee on Publishers and English Teachers will be available to interested members of the Council. Major functions of the committee will be to promote understanding and clarification of common concerns among publishers and English teachers; to encourage continuing discussion between the two groups; to network with other appropriate NCTE groups; and to propose Council convention sessions. If you would like to be considered for membership in this group, sent a one-page letter by January 15, 1988, explaining your specific interest in the committee, your relevant background, and your present professional work to Lori Alfe, Administrative Assistant to the Deputy Executive Director, NCTE, 1111 Kenyon Road, Urbana, IL 61801.

NCTE committee members are usually appointed for three-year terms. They are required to participate in committee deliberations and exchange ideas via correspondence, and are strongly urged to attend committee meetings held at the Annual Convention in November.
