3 | Social and Cultural Constraints on Students' Access to School Knowledge

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The point we want to argue in this chapter is that access to knowledge, including literacy, is socially situated and culturally constructed. That is to say, access to knowledge is created in the way we collectively conduct our face-to-face social interactions and social relationships and in the way we give meaning to the pursuit and enactment of knowledge. What people are exposed to, what they are purposefully taught, and what they actually learn are constrained by social arrangements in which we convey who is supposed to know what and under what circumstances and by the meanings that cohere in these social arrangements. The argument, developed by Frederick Gearing (Gearing & Sangree, 1979) and extended by Clement and Eisenhart (1979; Clement, Eisenhart, & Harding, 1979) continues as follows: Most of the information that we acquire in schools, and elsewhere, is cognitively easy to learn. If we are exposed to the information, given supportive opportunities to practice it, and permitted to demonstrate our knowledge of it, most of us will learn it without much trouble. This does *not* happen because social barriers or cultural norms define and limit the type and the amount of information that is supposed to be exchanged within and between social groups.

These different patterns of knowledge use, learned first in community and family social interactions, instantiate and direct the meaning of knowledge displayed by social groups. In families and communities knowledge is made social property, with parcels of it belonging to certain groups, other parcels to other groups. Because conventional social practices and cultural norms limit the occasions for interaction among certain social groups as well as the knowledge that is considered appropriate or natural for people in certain groups to have, information, skills, understandings, beliefs, preferences, interests, and abilities become concentrated in certain social groups and are unlikely to appear in others (Clement & Eisenhart, 1979). If such patterns go

undetected or are ignored, they create the foundation for unequal access to knowledge into the future.

Some would counter this argument by saying that this social distribution of knowledge is inevitable in nonschool settings, but schools are supposed to, and do, overcome such social factors. After all, schools take all kinds of children, mix them together in classrooms, try to teach all of them the same things, and try to evaluate all of them using the same measures. This argument continues: If some children get less of what the school offers, it is because they don't try, they don't have the "ability," or they don't get the support from home that they need. Schools are said to be, for example, "color-blind" and "gender neutral." On a theoretical level, we agree that schools could overcome the social and cultural channeling of access to knowledge, but in practice we are afraid that U.S. schools do not do so, at least not as well as they might. One reason why we who work in schools are not doing as much as we might is that we are often unaware of exactly how this channeling occurs.

In what follows, we will illustrate some of the ways that access to literacy is socially and culturally channeled. The examples begin with studies of children before entering school and in elementary school and move on to studies of young people in high school and college. The first example illustrates how the meaning of language use is first constructed in the social arrangements of children's families and communities; it is taken from Heath's work on language socialization. The second example demonstrates the role of the elementary school in organizing social groups and constructing meanings of literacy; it is based on Borko and Eisenhart's (1986) study of second-grade reading groups. The third example explores the contribution of high school and college peer groups, and it draws on the work of Fordham and Ogbu (1986) and of Holland and Eisenhart (1988a, 1988b). After presenting these examples, we will discuss some of our ideas about how problems associated with the social and cultural channeling of access to knowledge might be addressed in schools.

THE CHANNELING OF LITERACY BY COMMUNITY

Shirley Brice Heath (1982a, 1982b, 1983) examined children from different communities first in their homes and later in their schools. She was concerned with the way early experiences in the home generate patterns of communication that then may or may not correspond to those encountered at school. Drawing on Roland Barthes's description of "culture" as a "way of

taking" from the world, she demonstrates how early communicative patterns taught in the home organize knowledge and mediate the way it is acquired in school. She compares African-American working-class children of Trackton, white working-class children in Roadville, and middle-class children, both African-American and white, living in Gateway (fictitious names).

In Trackton life is a continuous bustle of social interactions with no fixed schedules or formal routines. Children learn that in order to gain the attention of others they are expected to be entertaining and creative in their use of language. Parents are not interested in their children's rote learning of words and phrases; rather they emphasize the need for youngsters to extend ideas from one situation to another, to recognize similar situations, and to gain control of an audience through language use. Children are rewarded for being creative and innovative in their story telling, and from a very early age Trackton infants learn to assume the roles and guises of others as they recount stories. The type of questioning that predominates in the home is heavily dependent on analogical reasoning skills: Children are asked questions such as, "Now, what you gonna do?" or "What's that like?" with a demand for creative and oftentimes witty answers, and no exact standards for correctness. For Trackton parents, these linguistic skills are necessary for children so they can stand on their own in the world.

Children in Roadville grow up in an environment that is very different. Here children are held to strict eating and sleeping schedules, and they are carefully "taught" how to use words correctly from their first days. Parents spend much time giving directives to their children, and questions are predominantly of the kind "What is this?" or "Where is that?"—questions that test for the referential meaning of words and for knowledge of facts already known to the speaker. Special attention is given to telling the truth and not telling "stories" that depart from the facts.

From the above it is clear that the preschool worlds of Trackton and Roadville children are miles apart, despite their geographic proximity. Further, the middle-class children from the town of Gateway are different from both the Trackton and the Roadville children: They are directed along paths that will be consistent with the demands made of them in their school years, and later in their working life. From infancy, children are seen as conversational partners. Thus they learn to listen and respond to others. Gateway children are asked predominantly "what" questions (as are children from Roadville); however, they are also taught to link old information to new information and to search for creative solutions (in this way more similar to Trackton children, although Gateway children are given more structured experiences for acquiring information than Trackton children).

When they begin school, both the Roadville and Trackton children enter a world where its "ways with words" are somewhat orthogonal to what they have learned in their homes. Initially Roadville children are able to perform adequately as they find a place for their learned ability to follow rules, to give the referential meanings of words, and to tell the "truth." However, as the school begins to demand imaginative thinking, merging reality and fantasy, Roadville children are quickly confused as they find conflicting rules in the school and in their homes.

On the other hand, Trackton children are well practiced in the skills of learning by observing others when they begin school, but the rigid format of the classroom—the stringent spatial and time rules, the demand for exactitude, and the emphasis on correct answers—baffles these creative entertainers. Heath describes how the Trackton children would insist on trying to take the floor during story time (as they would do at home), and how teachers saw this initially as a lack of "normal manners" and later as evidence of "behavior problems." Over a period of time, the communicative differences between Trackton children and the "mainstream" children and teachers led most of the former to be labeled "potential reading failures," despite the incredible interpretive and linguistic skills evidenced by the same children at home.

After tracking the school progress of the children in her study, Heath found that success in school was closely associated with community membership. Middle-class students from Gateway did best, followed by those from Roadville and then by those from Trackton.

Many others have also drawn attention to the communicative breakdowns between teachers and students from different communities (see Chapters 6, 7, 8, and 11). They stress that what young children know about language and its use is learned as part of the interactional/communicative routines of the group in which they grow up. Early home social environments shape the way children go on to understand the world by providing them with a particular set of mediational tools by which they learn how to make and take meaning. The social routines and mediational tools may be quite different from community to community. Parents, community members, and later teachers distribute information through particular mediational channels, only insofar as they know how to "give" it, and students are able to acquire the knowledge presented only insofar as they know how to "take" it. If significant differences between ways of giving and ways of taking go undetected or unaddressed, exchanges of information are likely to be haphazard or unrewarding, and the best intentions of parents, teachers, or students may go unrealized. Only when early patterns of learning are consistent with, or can be attached to, those used in the schools are children likely to benefit from the instruction provided there.

THE CHANNELING OF LITERACY BY ABILITY GROUP

Our second example comes from a study conducted in four second-grade classrooms of a public elementary school in Appalachia, during the 1981–82 school year. The study was designed to investigate students' "conceptions," or ideas, about reading and their reading experiences in each classroom. We were particularly interested in whether students differed in their reading conceptions and whether any differences seemed to be reflections of different reading experiences in school (the following discussion is taken from Borko & Eisenhart, 1986; note the similarity of our findings to those of Allington in Chapter 17).

At the study school, there were no typical minority groups. With the exception of one African-American child in each classroom, all the students were white, and most were middle class; they shared the experience of growing up in a small town/rural county of Appalachia. The four teachers were white, middle class, residents of the area, and in their 20s, with at least 5 years' experience at the school.

Despite the absence of minority groups, we found evidence of distinct social groups and associated information distribution. Here, students were officially divided according to "reading ability" as measured by standardized tests administered at the end of first grade. They were apportioned into four reading groups, as required by the district in all second-grade classrooms.

In general, patterns in the data suggest that students' ways of thinking about reading were related to their reading-group experiences. Low-group students were consistently more likely than high-group students to comment on behavior and procedures, and teachers were more likely to focus on student behavior and instructional procedures in low groups. Reading skills, and, to a more limited extent, global reading ability were also recognized in low-group students' conceptions, although they were mentioned less frequently than behavior. This ordering reflects the higher frequency with which teachers stressed behavior and reading skills (as contrasted to global reading), particularly in public performances in the low groups. High-group students were consistently more likely than low-group students to comment on global reading ability, and teachers more often gave high-group students opportunities to engage in such reading. High-group students also mentioned global reading ability more often than behavior in expressing their conceptions, reflecting the higher frequency with which teachers were observed to focus on global reading in contrast to behavior.

In this school, each reading group, together with the teacher, seemed to be operating with a distinct and closed informational system. Each system was exemplified by its own set of mutually supportive and reinforcing reading activities, student and teacher behaviors, student understandings of reading, and criteria for successful performance. In low-ability second-grade reading groups, students defined learning to read as a process of attempting to behave appropriately while sounding out words, following procedures, and using materials correctly; and they identified as successful those students who performed accordingly. Correspondingly, the teachers (using the designated curriculum) stressed and rewarded correct decoding and appropriate behavior.

This system operated in marked contrast to the system in high reading groups. Here, students focused on "reading a lot" and "reading fast" and were beginning to orient toward reading for meaning. Teachers stressed and rewarded these activities while virtually ignoring student behavior and procedural aspects of the reading program. Together, teachers and high-group students constructed a system in which success was measured primarily in terms of global reading and comprehension.

Implicit in these reading systems were differing criteria for success. For students in high-ability groups, success in group is equivalent to success in class. Students' strong performances in high-group activities are likely to bring them good grades on report cards and high status in class as well as praise from teachers. For students in low groups, in contrast, success in group is not equivalent to success in class. Strong performances in group may bring praise from the teacher but are not likely to bring students good report card grades or high status in class. The reading program thus becomes a means not only of grouping students to facilitate instruction but also of manifesting different views of success and of the relationship between success in group and success in class.

The situation makes movement into a higher group very difficult for low-group students. In order to move up, not only must these students simply work harder and learn more; they must also learn qualitatively different information. To do this, they must learn to think differently about reading and must direct their efforts toward different aspects of learning to read. Yet the closed system of the reading group, with its set of mutually reinforcing knowledge, beliefs, and practices, does not provide the opportunities for these changes to occur, at least not quickly.

It is easy to see how such a reading program can produce a widening gap between high- and low-group readers as students progress through school. It is also easy to see how the self-perpetuating systems of knowledge, belief, and practice that operate within groups become the mechanisms by which some students—namely, those in low groups—learn that they do not have, and are unlikely ever to have, access to the "real" rewards of schooling. Thus, they may be encouraged to look elsewhere (e.g., to peers, to non-

school-sanctioned activities) for satisfaction and status. Regardless of background or home experiences, students in low groups are vulnerable to such pressures. Students from communities that offer alternatives to educational success (e.g., through family money or networks, illegal activities, or getting pregnant or married) will find it easier to turn away from the school, but the need to "turn away" can be created in the school setting when students acquire different information and, as a consequence, are not afforded equal access to school-based rewards.

The works of Fordham and Ogbu (1986), Holland and Eisenhart (1988a, 1988b), Ogbu (1974), and Willis (1977) powerfully illustrate how lack of success and status in the reward system of the school can lead older students not to want to (or not to care whether they) do well in school or subvert the purposes of schooling. We take up this body of work as our third example.

THE CHANNELING OF SCHOOL KNOWLEDGE
BY PEER GROUP

Fordham and Ogbu (1986) describe how making good grades and otherwise doing well in high school are defined by some African-American high school peer groups in Washington, D.C., as "acting white"—a socially enforced categorization that discourages bright young African-Americans from trying to do well in school. Willis's (1977) work reveals how the peer groups of working-class boys in Britain discourage their members from doing well in school, and Eisenhart's recent work with Holland (Holland & Eisenhart, 1988a, 1988b) suggests how the attraction of participating in the campus romance system diverts bright college women from their schoolwork and future careers.

The peer group at Capital High where Fordham and Ogbu did their study provided a definition of how its members should "take" from high school, and individuals had to learn how to conform in one way or another to its standards if they were to remain in the group. Fordham and Ogbu found that "studying hard" or "excelling" in school were viewed negatively by the African-American peer group. A deeper analysis of the group's structure and attitudes revealed that it emphasized an identity as "black" and constructed a culture (a way of taking) that directly opposed those activities that were viewed as being a valued part of white culture. Thus the African-American peer group opposed academic success and numerous other activities that

were seen as "acting white," such as speaking standard English, reading poetry, or joining the "It's Academic" Club.

Fordham and Ogbu's research is a powerful demonstration of the tensions that arise between two opposing cultures and the hardships faced by students who attempt to defy their peer group and culture. In particular, academically competent African-American students either had to expend enormous efforts to displace attention from their academic success so as to remain acceptable to their peer group or had to disengage themselves from classroom work, hence becoming underachievers. Compliance or performance consistent with the school culture labeled "white" threatened them with being called "brainiacs" and with being ostracized by their peers.

Fordham and Ogbu's work speaks to the need for a greater understanding of the influence of the peer group in channeling learning in the school (see also Eisenhart & Holland, 1983). For whatever reason—whether it be the perceived job ceiling for African-Americans in society, the cultural identity of African-Americans in opposition to the "white" standards and values expounded in the schools, or some other factors—the peer group exerted an influence on its members that undermined academic success. In this way African-American students were encouraged not to take from the school, not to learn what the school had to offer.

Holland and Eisenhart's (1988a, 1988b) work is yet another illustration of the role of the peer group, this time defined in terms of gender, in mediating school learning and success. This research shows how schoolwork becomes marginalized in the lives of African-American and white college women, as another more salient identity becomes central to their lives: the identity of a female in a romantic relationship. Holland and Eisenhart describe three initial orientations to the world of college work held by the women in their study: "work in exchange for doing well," "work in exchange for getting [it] over," and "work in exchange for learning from experts" (1988b, p. 273). They show how it is mostly those women who initially held the latter orientation—work in exchange for learning from experts—who were able to go through college without losing enthusiasm for schoolwork, school achievement, and career aspirations. For most of the rest, early disappointments with schoolwork, combined with a pervasive peer culture that emphasized involvement in the campus "culture of romance" (1988a), soon overwhelmed career goals and minimized the perceived importance of school learning and achievements.

In a very real sense then, students' memberships in different social groups are an organizing factor in their experience of formal education, with serious implications for school success and academic achievement. Social

groups not only act to structure ways of perceiving the world but also mediate what is perceived, what is learned, and what is transmitted in the school.

WHAT MIGHT BE DONE ABOUT ALL THIS?

The examples above as well as many others illustrated in this volume convince us of the need to think much more carefully about the social inter-actions and cultural norms that constrain what students learn. If we do not take into account the social and cultural aspects of learning literacy, or any other school subject, we as teachers are doomed to fail to achieve our own goals and aspirations for our work.

We think that anthropologists know some things about how we might address these social and cultural aspects of learning. We now turn to their work to guide our discussion of possible remedies.

Place Reading and Writing in Familiar Contexts

First, numerous studies by anthropologists of education demonstrate that the school performance of young nonmainstream children can be in-creased dramatically when steps are taken to create culturally familiar and comfortable classroom situations for them. For example, Heath (1983) de-scribes the efforts of several teachers to create effective learning environ-ments for the very different communities feeding into their school. One teacher, "Mrs. Gardner," began her year with a class of 19 African-American first graders—all labeled "potential failures" on the basis of reading-readiness tests. Angered that "these children were designated 'no chance of success' before [even] entering school" (p. 286), Mrs. Gardner set out to provide an exciting learning environment for them—an environment that would, at the same time, draw on experiences relevant to their own lives.

On learning who would be in her class, Mrs. Gardner visited the com-munities that fed into it, jotting down such features as store names and streets, churches, and the location of street lights and telephone poles in the areas. Noting that several parents worked in local garages, she called them up and asked them for old tires, which were then cut up and used to make letters of the alphabet. Her curious requests got several parents intrigued, and soon many came to the school to help her construct the letters which were then scattered just outside the classroom.

As the semester began, Mrs. Gardner attempted to introduce the alpha-bet to her students, not merely as symbols on paper but also as structured shapes apparent all over their neighborhoods. Children were asked to search

for the big T's (telephone poles), to find the O's and the A's in such things as cups and saucers, tires, and street wires. They were also instructed to look for these shapes on license plates. As they became familiar with the shapes, Mrs. Gardner introduced the associated letter sounds—first by concentrating on the letters that began each child's name and then by having children rec-ognize certain sounds in words heard throughout the day. Next, children used advertisements to separate lower-case from upper-case letters, then matched them. Mrs. Gardner also took pictures of her students that were then used to illustrate such concepts as "over," "under," "higher," and "lower."

By the end of their first year, benefiting from many more creative teach-ing activities, all but one child (who was later placed in a class for the emo-tionally handicapped) were reading on at least grade level—with eight at third-grade level, and six at second-grade level! The efforts to make class-room learning an integral part of the lives of the students—rather than iso-lated, nonmeaningful activities—allowed previously "doomed" individuals to reach outstanding levels of competence.

Heath (1983) also describes the efforts of "Mrs. Pat" to contextualize reading and writing for second graders in a rural school—again providing an excellent example of how cultural and linguistic differences in the classroom need not isolate certain individuals from the learning process but rather may serve to sensitize all children to the different "ways with words" that exist in society and that structure their own learning.

Most of Mrs. Pat's students came from poor farming families—35% of them African-American, the rest white. The first step in helping children along with their reading and writing was to show the relevance of these skills to the wider context of their lives. To this end, Mrs. Pat contacted parents, community members, the principal, lunchroom workers, and other students and had them come to her second-grade classroom to talk about their ways of communicating, to explain how and why they used reading and writing, and to show the children samples of their writing and reading materials.

Before every meeting, Mrs. Pat prepared her students to act as ethnog-raphers—"detectives"—focusing on language in this case, by having them listen for answers to the following questions:

What sounds do you hear when _____ talks?
What did _____ say about how he talked?
What did _____ write?
What did _____ read?

At the same time, children were exposed to a variety of literature—dialect poetry, radio scripts, comics, biographies of famous baseball heroes, in con-

junction with the traditional basal readers and workbook exercises. Students became familiar with a variety of language data, thereby learning more about the situational use of language and differing attitudes toward it. They learned the difference between dialect, casual, formal, conversational, and standard language use; the different oral and written traditions. "Throughout the year, the entire focus of the classroom was on language, its 'building blocks' in sound and in print, the ways its building blocks were put together, and how these varied in accordance with speaker and use in print or speech" (Heath, 1983, pp. 330–331).

Not surprisingly, by the end of the school year, Mrs. Pat's class had developed an amazing metalinguistic vocabulary and many ways of talking about language. They had also come to see school reading and writing as connected to activities in the wider world: "Learning to read and write in school was now linked to reading and writing labels and bills in the country store, the cafeteria worker's set of recipes, the church bulletin, or a notice of a local baseball game" (Heath, 1983, p. 333). Children had gained a sensitivity and understanding for the linguistic differences between people from all walks of life. Most importantly, however, these second graders now identified themselves as readers and writers.

Accommodate Different Cultural Traditions

As discussed by several authors in this volume, the researchers of the Kamehameha Elementary Education Program (KEEP) have shown how dramatic changes in school performance can take place when learning environments are modified to accommodate the different cultures within a classroom. These ethnographers have restructured classroom practices to cater more appropriately first to Hawaiian-American students' "ways of taking" and now to Navajo students (see, e.g., Vogt, Jordan, & Tharp, 1987).

Accommodate Peer Cultures

At the high school level, we also have evidence that when teachers make attempts to bridge the world of peers and that of the school, they can create the conditions for students, otherwise pulled away by peers and others, to perform successfully in school. The cases described by Dillon (1988), Kleinfield (1979), and Willis (1977), to name some, include examples of teachers who find ways to communicate their care for students' cultural traditions and to get across the subject matters of the school.

We think that recent work suggesting the success of cooperative learning groups, at least for black students (Slavin, 1983), is indicative of the kind of

classroom reorganization that *could* draw on and perhaps accommodate, rather than alienate, student peer groups and their associated cultures. However, such reorganizations, to be successful, must be sensitive both to the power of peer group influences on students and the particular sociohistorical conditions that create and maintain peer group patterns and norms. We know, for example, that the peer culture of romance that diverts women's attention from schoolwork and careers is constructed quite differently from the racially oriented peer culture that diverts Fordham and Ogbu's students (Holland & Eisenhart, 1990). Cooperative learning groups that aim to tap the power of the peer group must take such differences into account.

Make Groups Flexible

About the problem of ability grouping that produces social and cultural differentiation in schoolwork activities, we encourage teachers and administrators to think more flexibly about ways to organize learning activities and to evaluate progress in language arts and other school subjects. Anthropologist Sylvia Hart (1982) suggests, for example, that children's reading style, situation, and taste, as well as their speed and accuracy ("ability"), could be used to group and regroup students for schoolwork.

Reorganize Teacher-Student Relationships

In addition and perhaps most importantly, teacher-student relationships might be reorganized to promote classroom learning. The relationship of teacher-as-authority and student-as-recipient is not the only available model. Anthropologists know, for example, from studies of primate socialization, of small-scale societies in which formal education plays a less important role, and of informal education in our own society that infants and youngsters can learn easily, with only a little *supervision*. Dobbert and Cooke (1987) sum up this anthropological knowledge as follows:

> Human adults . . . functioning as educators fail to note that human children are designed to learn. . . . [Instead] they deliberately set out to teach [in the sense of purposeful instruction] the young of the one species which least requires teaching. . . . Juvenile primates, including humans, when left to their own devices, with just a bit of supervision to prevent harm . . . will learn easily and well during all their pre-adult years to the point where they will be ready to step into and learn adult roles through practice when they reach that age. (p. 101)

Anthropologists have also found that young primates learn what they need to know to function as competent adults in warm, trusting, and caring

environments where youngsters practice the skills, knowledge, beliefs, vocabularies, and social relations of those around them in safe and low-risk situations (Dobbert & Cooke, 1987). Warm, trusting, culturally sensitive environments are not created overnight; they require extended exposure to and involvement with the people of interest and then hard work to produce meaningful translations from what is already known to what might be learned. In this regard, McDermott (1977) suggests building teacher-student relationships *of trust*. Trust, according to McDermott, is a product of the work that people do to achieve a shared focus. Thus trust is context-sensitive; it can develop only when two or more people take the time to show they care for each other. It is an achievement that is managed through social interaction. According to McDermott, trusting relationships are a crucial first step for the success of any educational endeavor.

Build Scaffolds

Another thing anthropologists know is that in nonschool education children almost never learn directly from true experts. They learn from slightly older peers or (merely) competent adults, who, taken together and over time, can be viewed as providing the "scaffolding," or intermediate teaching and learning forms, that allow novices to develop into experts. Greenfield (1984) talks of such scaffolding as the activity of a teacher trying to close the gap between specific task requirements and the skill level of a learner. A good example of such scaffolding can be seen in the interactive processes occurring between a mother and her infant: The mother's actions are always contingent upon her child's responses—each time challenging her infant further and thereby producing effective learning situations.

Greenfield provides numerous other examples of this "scaffolding process," as do several authors in this volume (see Chapters 9 and 13). Central to Greenfield's notion of "scaffolding" is the idea that the scaffold supports what an individual can already do. In this way, a scaffold builds on what Vygotsky (1978) refers to as the "zone of proximal development" of a particular individual: The fuzzy temporary boundaries of knowledge and skill are continually being moved as individuals are helped through another stage of learning, only to uncover even more challenging boundaries ahead. The role of the teacher is to facilitate movement across boundaries—movement that is best achieved by providing effective bridges between what is already known and what remains to be learned.

Broaden School Knowledge

Anthropologists also know that most of what is really taught by and learned from adults in schools is social and procedural information and knowledge (the so-called "hidden curriculum" of schooling). If we judge by time spent and emphasis placed, students spend much more time learning how to use space, how to use time, how to follow directions and rules, how to use specialized language forms, and how to persist through tasks than they do learning how to use the subject matter information of school (see, e.g., Goodlad, 1984). From our point of view, there are no good reasons why *this* information and knowledge cannot be made sensitive to the social and cultural norms of the students being served. The work of Heath (1983) and Vogt et al. (1987) is testament to the fact that nonmainstream students can learn the subject matter of school quite well when social relationships and procedures are attuned to patterns that are already familiar to the students.

Finally, as things stand now, almost all school knowledge, including the subject matter material, comes from a narrow strand of U.S. cultural tradition, one that recognizes, rewards, and empowers only a very few members of our vast and heterogeneous society. We think this too should be changed, not just to be consistent with the rhetoric of equity but because anthropologists know that variation and alternatives in a social system are highly adaptive, especially in times of change. Students' experiences can be validated *and* enriched by incorporation into the curriculum of the abundant scholarly products of individuals and groups from around the world.

SUMMARY

Armed with all this knowledge, we should not allow the educational and the bureaucratic managers—and now the "cultural literacy" and the "English-only" types—to win most of the battles over how and what things should be taught in schools. This thrust of our current educational reform movement is *not* consistent with what anthropologists know about the social conditions conducive to equal access to knowledge. The school created by the present educational reform mania for programmed instruction at ever earlier grades, more homework, longer school days, tests of basic skills, minimum competencies, curriculum gates, and standardized achievement assessments could hardly be further from the educational world as depicted by Heath (1983), Vogt et al. (1987), Dobbert and Cooke (1987), McDermott (1977), Greenfield (1984), or many of the authors in this book.

When teachers are required to teach everyone the same curriculum or to prepare everyone for the same test at the same time; when schools allocate "professional development" or "in-service" time for speakers and programs related to new directions in classroom management but not for getting to know students in their homes, families, or peer groups, or for programs based on social or cultural perspectives; and when schools employ school

psychologists but not school ethnographers, we are not giving teachers or students the time or resources they need to build trusting, warm, and culturally sensitive relationships or teachers the chance to become effective "brokers" between the children's worlds and that of the school.

The research discussed above and numerous other anthropological efforts demonstrate the impact of the classroom organization as a potential barrier or, at best, a facilitator, to student learning, depending on the extent to which it incorporates "ways of taking" that are familiar and accessible to students. It is imperative that teachers be made aware of the role they play in mediating the learning experiences of their students through the ways they organize their classroom. It is vital that teachers realize the need to understand the social groups and cultures of their students and to adjust the learning environment accordingly. However, the time and perseverance needed for "success stories" of the kind described above cannot be overstated. Heath (1983) spent 10 years as an ethnographer and teacher trainer in the communities and schools she describes, and Vogt et al. (1987) spent more than 10 years in theirs. But the results are clear: An understanding of the cultures present in the classroom led to marked changes in educational practice that, in turn, produced astounding improvements in student learning.

So let us end by charging you—and ourselves—to think about and investigate these matters much more critically. And let's see if we can't construct a better educational future for the wonderfully heterogeneous children who are trying to find their ways, to "take meaning," in the next generations of American society.

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