

PROMISES AND PUZZLES OF CULTURALLY SENSITIVE TEACHING

By Margaret Eisenhart

The University of Arizona Funds of Knowledge for Teaching Project is part of a long tradition in applied educational anthropology that seeks to improve the experiences of non-mainstream, or "culturally different," students in schools. Unlike most previous work, however, this project engages the "natives" directly in the practice of ethnography. Here, teachers and to a lesser extent parents and students collect information, develop interpretations of data, and formulate applications. Anthropologists remain necessary and vital resources, to be sure, but the insights of "being there," knowing what insiders actually do, and experiencing life with them belong to the teachers.

This sharing—dare I say relinquishing—of disciplinary power goes beyond asking natives to participate in collaborative research, assisting them to write their own accounts, or encouraging them to act on research results. It engages them directly in the promise and production of ethnographic fieldwork and applied anthropology in education. It puts the power to design culturally sensitive teaching in the hands of teachers, parents, and students.

To my mind, this project is a thoughtful and brave attempt to move into a new and more radical area of applied work. Yet, I also worry that relevant insights from previous anthropological work might be overlooked in the process.

What is this applied tradition in educational anthropology? When culture and schools are talked about together in the United States, culture is often made the explanation for non-mainstream children's difficulties in school. Many educational anthropologists have found that minority communities expect behaviors, use communication styles, and follow models of success or growing

up that differ from those presumed in dominant communities, including the school. (For example, see Erickson, Heath, Ogbu, Philips, and Trueba in "For Further Reading," this issue.) When these cultural differences go undetected or unaddressed, minority children are put at a disadvantage in school. For example, a teacher might take a student's innocent attempt to conform with ethnic behavioral expectations as evidence of intentional misbehavior in school; a teacher also might take parents' reluctance to come to school as evidence that they "lack interest" in their children's education. The tradition of anthropological research in this area has amply demonstrated that negative assumptions on the part of teachers are often the result of misunderstanding the cultural forms of minority groups.

In some cases, educational anthropologists have intervened to bridge this kind of home-school gap. Working both in homes and at school, they have identified points of difference, suggested strategies for bridging the gap, and actively contributed to attempts at change (for example, Heath, Jordan, Moll and Diaz, and Trueba, as cited in "For Further Reading"). The Funds of Knowledge for Teaching Project joins good company in this effort.

In addition, the Funds of Knowledge for Teaching Project extends this tradition, especially its applied methodology. When this project began, its conceptual design—to explore non-mainstream household funds of knowledge as a resource to be strategically tapped to foster education (González, this issue)—placed it squarely in the tradition of educational anthropology described above. Its applied methodology was quite conventional: Send trained anthropologists to collect data which practitioners can use to improve their effectiveness.

Soon, however, the project team realized that this methodology was not

producing the desired effect. Practitioners were not developing a genuine commitment to the variety, complexity, and richness of the cultural data from their clients (students and parents). When information collected by anthropologists was presented to the teachers, the teachers treated it as just one more thing to incorporate into the existing curriculum of the school. Meetings at which anthropologists "shared" their insights became, for the teachers, a form of didactic instruction about relatively stable "cultural differences."

In an attempt to strengthen and deepen the teachers' appreciation of culture and cultural difference, the project methodology was changed to allow the teachers themselves to collect the primary data. Rather than learning about children's culture in the abstract or ideal, as say, "Mexican culture," the teachers learned directly about their students' funds of knowledge. In the process, the teachers were introduced to the variety and multiplicity of family traditions and experiences. As the teachers became active researchers, their views of culture and of the Mexican American, African American, and Native American families they serve were greatly expanded, even transformed. The after-school groups gave the teachers the time and opportunity to reflect on the cultural compatibility of their practice and to act out of their indigenous cultural knowledge.

This exposure and reflection seem to have had a profound effect on the teachers. In words similar to those used by anthropologists returning from a previously unfamiliar field site, we hear in the teachers' accounts a sincere interest in and appreciation for the lives of the people they were observing and interviewing. These teachers seem to have become sensitized—in a deep way that regular teacher inservices can never achieve—to the cultural resources and circumstances of their students' lives.

Of special significance to me, someone who has spent considerable time with teachers, are the strong voices that this project seems to have given these teachers. In my experience, teachers are often hesitant to work with researchers, with good reason. Teachers fear extra demands on their time, treatment as less-than-equal participants, and general disregard for their knowledge and for the practical requirements and rewards of their jobs. Many times, their fears are realized. In contrast, the Funds of Knowledge for Teaching Project has given participating teachers a sense of confidence about themselves and their students that is very impressive.

Cathy Amanti, commenting on her experiences in the project, says,

Anthropology has provided me with conceptual tools to rework and improve my teaching... [As the teaching profession is currently structured] I am expected to structure my practice according to research, curricula, and means of assessment developed by individuals who have no firsthand knowledge of my students. This is something I am no longer willing to do.

Jane Gittings' stories of coming to understand Allen and Brian in the context of their lives and families outside of school demonstrates the power of the project to increase teachers' confidence in their knowledge of their students. Michael Craig was inspired to develop a new curriculum for fostering students' social awareness—no small task—through the use of ethnographic research and analytic skills.

The project also has improved the relationship between teachers and parents. Martha Floyd-Tenery writes,

Prior to becoming involved in this project, I viewed parent participation as parents coming into the school to volunteer on teacher-designed projects. This is a one-sided approach in which parents and their children are seen as objects which need to be changed

to fit the school rather than as individuals with interests, aspirations, expectations, resources, and skills which can contribute to the improvement of the school.

Marla Hensley's story of Mr. Jarman is a wonderful case in point of a parent and a teacher whose lives were positively affected by the opportunity to interact more closely with each other.

In sum, the teachers' excitement and enthusiasm for their work in the Funds of Knowledge for Teaching Project and

ing"). Once significant mismatches are identified, then culturally sensitive changes could be made in instructional practice, classroom content, and classroom organization. Only after many years of careful consideration of what worked and what did not, were Jordan and her colleagues able to redesign the classroom in ways that proved to be educationally effective in increasing the Hawaiian students' engagement in academic tasks and their achievement scores (Vogt, Jordan, and Tharp; see also McCarty et al. and

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What is left out? Cathie Jordan and her colleagues, whose work with at-risk native Hawaiian children in the Kamehameha Early Education Program (KEEP) has become a classic in applied educational anthropology, has long argued that knowledge of culture or cultural difference is not (alone) sufficient to improve students' school achievement. (See Jordan in “For Further Reading.”) In her work in Hawaii and later on the Navajo Reservation at the Rough Rock Demonstration School, Jordan has found that not everything brought from home facilitates school success.

Jordan and her colleagues found that effective bridging of the home-school gap for non-mainstream students depends on careful attention to specific mismatches—those that interfere with school success. To identify the troubling mismatches, the specific effects of home and school activity settings must be identified or “unpacked” for their cultural and educational significance to students (Weisner, Gallimore and Jordan, as cited in “For Further Read-

Watson-Gegeo and Gegeo for similar results with other groups, all as cited in “For Further Reading”).

The example of Jordan's work suggests that *general* sensitivity to cultural variety and difference is a starting point, but not the end point of culturally sensitive teaching. It suggests that a next step for the Funds of Knowledge for Teaching Project is to distinguish specific features of household funds of knowledge that seem critical to school success and then to develop and test the effectiveness of specific instructional and curricular revisions designed with these features in mind.

For teachers, more specific information about how funds of knowledge can be used to develop effective curricula for particular groups would seem to be especially helpful. How might curriculum units be chosen from the array of funds? (Will any fund of knowledge work?) What might a culturally sensitive curriculum unit based on household funds of knowledge look like? How are funds of knowledge integrated with other school activities? How does the school content of reading, writing,

mathematics, science, and so forth show up in these units? Also, what are some means by which teachers' time could be freed to pursue the research and development needed for these curricular changes?

Another point raised by Jordan's work is that effective educational changes are highly specific to groups. When the techniques that Jordan and her colleagues had used successfully to improve language arts instruction with native Hawaiians were implemented at Rough Rock, they did not work very well. Changes specific to Navajo students' educational success and sensitive to their ways had to be identified and implemented before their performance improved.

This raises the question of how funds of knowledge from one family or group might be used effectively in multicultural classrooms. Can changes be made in classrooms such that they benefit all or most students, even though they have been derived from the experiences of a few? These are questions which the KEEP and Rough Rock teachers and researchers did not face in their culturally homogeneous (relatively speaking) settings. They seem to be questions that must be addressed if this model is to be used in more diverse classrooms.

There also is more to creating the conditions for minority student success in schools than cultural sensitivity. In a provocative article, Rosemarie Rizzo-Tolk and Hervé Varenne point out that schools are organized—fundamentally—to produce “success” and “failure” (as cited in “For Further Reading”). For this reason, some students must always be defined as “failures,” and attempts to change their experiences of schooling must aim higher than culturally sensitive teaching.

In the classroom example described by Rizzo-Tolk and Varenne, poor and minority students were engaged in an exploration of homelessness, a situation with which many were familiar. This study of homelessness could be considered an example of a curriculum unit designed to draw on the students' cultural experiences, to involve mem-

bers of their communities, and to increase their social awareness. In many ways, these goals were realized, and the students' work can be judged a “success.”

Yet, for all these students' accomplishments, many of their teachers, as well as general audiences who viewed a video of their work, found ways to judge the students as “failures” based on a few characteristics of their work and “knowing” what kind of students these were. In addition, the students' own responses to their work suggest that although they learned to be more sympathetic to the homeless (a goal of the curriculum), they did not also unlearn the culturally stereotyped, negative view of homelessness pervasive in wider U.S. society. Instead, the students learned when to respond in ways deemed appropriate within the curriculum and when to respond in ways consistent with society's expectations. This study suggests that culturally sensitive teaching based on household funds of knowledge may be only one step—albeit an important one—in overcoming the barriers that interfere with non-mainstream students' chances to “succeed” in school.

Finally, in a more pointed way, a few anthropologists have suggested that features of home culture may not travel well to school. Features of home culture brought into school may lose their context-specific meanings. (See Gilmore as cited in “For Further Reading.”) In some cases, their meaning and significance can be trivialized or vulgarized by association with or use in the school (e.g., see Dorris in “For Further Reading”). Further, once in the school, features of home or ethnic cultures may be understood and manipulated in ways over which the teachers as well as parents have little control. Dimensions of ethnic identity may become mediating mechanisms in establishing peer group boundaries and relations, as well as teacher-student relations, and features of ethnic identity may be used in ways inappropriate to the group from which they came. (See Fitzgerald and Foley as cited in “For Further Reading.”) These are facets of culturally sensitive

teaching to which the Funds of Knowledge for Teaching Project is committed in theory but with which it has not yet grappled in practice.

I close with two questions that have long bedeviled educational anthropologists concerned about efforts such as culturally sensitive teaching:

Are we *appropriating* these children's indigenous culture [funds of knowledge] in order to teach them somebody else's knowledge, culture, and values at the expense of their own? Or is our purpose to *empower* children, that is, make it possible for them to acquire school knowledge in a context that also privileges and validates their own cultural knowledge and values? (Watson-Gegeo and Gegeo, as cited in “For Further Reading;” emphasis in original)

Certainly the participants in Funds of Knowledge for Teaching Project favor the second purpose. Yet, like those involved in the work that preceded theirs, they must continually struggle with the educational, societal, and moral implications of *both* positions.

Teachers, parents, students, and other concerned citizens need to think carefully and collectively about the implications of bringing cultural knowledge into schools and about good ways to do that. The Funds of Knowledge for Teaching Project is one arena for such discussion and deliberation. I applaud their efforts and look forward to their contributions in the future.

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