

SETTINGS FOR EDUCATION IN THE INNER CITY

An exploratory ethnography of education an inner city neighborhood

by

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RESEARCH DESCRIPTION

1. This is a proposal for the first step in a larger project exploring settings for education in an inner city neighborhood. This step will focus on institutional settings such as churches, mosques, clubs, welfare agencies, etc. Our main techniques at this point will be interviews with their leaders and staff members. We are concerned with identifying the overall properties of the programs they deem “educational.” Our main research questions are: How do leaders of institutions in an inner city neighborhood talk about education? What do they do within their institutions that they consider educational? How do they talk about their resources? How do they talk about what hinders them? The techniques used will consist mostly of observations in public settings, interviews with adults who have responsibilities for the programs, and brief visits to the settings where the programs are conducted.

This research builds on recent work by Professor Hervé Varenne (forth) intended to refocus research in education by refining the definition of what is to count as education beyond the distinctions usually made between the “formal” and the “informal,” or learning “in” school vs. learning “outside” of school. While it is easy to say that education is much more than school learning, most research in the social sciences “of education” have ended being conducted in schools or, more invidiously, in the terms set by schooling. This has led, among other things, to an emphasis on explanations of school success/failure which end up reconstructing deficit models—even when the intention of the research is precisely to move beyond such models (Varenne and McDermott 1998). Our overall goal is to recast educational research so that it encompasses schooling as just one form, rather than be encompassed by it. Identifying what, among all that happens in families and communities, helps or hinders school performance may be a useful task—even if it risks labeling again some families and communities as “lacking” that which others have. But even if the risk is

worth taking, we are left with little understanding of what families and communities do that is both fundamentally educational and altogether independent from school strictures. We are thinking of such matters as education into religion, political ideology, discourses about social and economic conditions, the popular arts, and indeed schooling itself as an object of knowledge and activity for families, local groups, and leaders who, through their political activities actually constitute the school and what can happen there.

Our goal is to explore the life of people in an inner city neighborhood to highlight what is being done that is arguably educational. We start with the postulate that people, everywhere, unceasingly, and always in concert with others, work at changing themselves and their consociates through often difficult deliberations. This is the deliberate and deliberative work in which we recognize education to the extent that it involves the discovery of particular forms of ignorance, various searches for getting knowledge, for identifying further ignorance in oneself and others, for teaching. In this perspective, the concern is less the outcome of education (what *has been* learned) than the process of education (what *is being* learned). In this perspective, what is to remain most salient is the interaction among the people involved in the activity, the organization of this interaction, and the evolution of this organization as people discover the consequences of earlier moves.

In Lawrence Cremin's first approximations of the overall postulate about the ubiquity of education and its peculiarly "deliberate" aspects (1974), he wrote about education happening in many "institutions" beyond the school (churches, the media, clubs, etc.). In our current approximation, we emphasize "settings" and "occasions" when members of a collectivity discuss their conditions and attempt to transform each other (through teaching, preaching, persuading, explaining, justifying, etc.). Such a collectivity can be as small as two people arguing, a "family," or wider groupings where people are brought together, willingly or not, and end up working at transforming each other. These "communities of practice" (Lave and Wenger 1991), as they have been called in recent social scientific writings, are ubiquitous in the everyday life of all human beings. They are the occasions when personal lives are built with the resources made available, and also when personal lives are limited by the barriers others often place on personal development.

Our intention is to report on the extent of the activities of people in an inner city neighborhood as they educate themselves and each other about their conditions and what they can do about it. Against much theorizing that people in oppressed situations are blinded by the forces that legitimize the mechanisms that constitute this oppression (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977/1970), we are convinced on the basis of preliminary research and much theorizing (de Certeau 1980/1984; Garfinkel 2002; Rancière 1991/1999) that a different way of looking at familiar experiences will reveal complex forms of practical understandings that are not usually well documented. Where others have seen deficits, or even sometimes searched for them, we will be looking for forms of knowledge and, most importantly, forms of seeking new and more powerful knowledge—that is forms of education.

We envision this project as a long term one that will eventually take us into families, businesses, groups of friends, etc. At this stage we will focus solely on non-school but institutionalized settings such as churches, mosques, clubs, after-school and social welfare programs, where groups get together to develop distinctly labeled and organized activities (Gordon et al 2005). Given what we expect to be the wide-spread use of the word “education” for what is done in these settings, we think it important to investigate the practical understandings of this word. We take this to be partially a matter of social cognition. But we also take it to be a matter of the social construction of activities, programs, etc. that imply various forms of political controls (who sets the curriculum and pedagogies to be used, who chooses students and teachers, etc.)

DESCRIPTION OF HUMAN SUBJECTS POPULATION & THEIR INVOLVEMENT IN THE RESEARCH

2. Up to two dozen adult leaders and staff members of such institutions as churches, mosques, temples or other faith-based institutions, as well as social welfare agencies, after-school programs and clubs. They will be speakers of English. Gender, religion, race, ethnic background, socio-economic and health status, will not be criteria.

3. Participants will be asked to respond to questions put to them in semi-structured interview format. These would last about two hours. If they are willing they will be asked for a follow-up interview (for another two hours) and for permission for the team to observe briefly their program, for a total time investment of about eight hours.
4. Not applicable
5. Possible institutions will be identified through visual surveys of streets in the neighborhood, web and phonebook searches, as well as recommendations from people who know the neighborhood, as well as from the first participants.
6. Not applicable

CONFIDENTIALITY PROCEDURES

7. All data collected from interviews and observations within the institutions will be kept confidential. All records will be kept in locked cabinets at Teachers College and in password protected computer directories. Particular care will be taken to ensure that individuals are not identifiable in publications from the project. This will be done through the use of composite vignettes. There will not attempt to keep confidential the name of the city (New York) or neighborhood (Harlem) within which the research will be conducted. Given the overall context of the research, its funding, and its place within Teachers College, such an attempt would be futile.
8. Not applicable

DESCRIPTION OF RESEARCH RISKS AND BENEFITS

9. The risks involved during the interview process involve such mild discomfort as boredom and irritation at the questions or interviewers. These are rarely strong enough to interrupt the interview though, if the participant objects, the interview will immediately cease. There are somewhat more risks at research publication time if matters are reported that the

participant did not at the time of the interview notice as potentially embarrassing. The confidentiality procedures should mitigate this.

10. There will be no direct benefit to the participants or their institutions.

INFORMED CONSENT PROCEDURES

11. Potential participants will be contacted either by phone, e-mail, or in person. These earlier contacts will establish the status of the team as researchers from Teachers College, Columbia University, though it will be made clear that they are not representatives of the institution. The goal of the research will be described as making an inventory of the educational programs to be found in the neighborhood that are not run by the schools. We will explain that our definition of educational programs is very broad and we will give examples to clarify this (mentioning such things as Sunday schools, after-school tutoring programs, athletic clubs, health outreach efforts, etc.). Most of the participants are expected to have at least some years of college and to be familiar with social science research. They will be offered copies of the overall proposal and other materials they might be interested in (the curriculum vitae of the team members, samples of their publications, etc.). Finally, a web site will be maintained where further description of the research, its funding and contexts, will be made available.

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INFORMED CONSENT

DESCRIPTION OF THE RESEARCH: You are invited to participate in an exploratory research study of people and institutions involved in education outside of schools in your community. The goal is to highlight the extent of this informal education as it is provided by such institutions as churches, mosques, after-school clubs, social welfare agencies, etc.

You have been selected because of your role as leader or staff member in one of these institutions. You will be asked questions about the history of your institution and its educational programs; about their organization, staffing, and audience; about the relationship of your institution with its local community and the broader city. These interviews will be audio-taped if you agree. We believe that audio-taping will allow us to be more accurate when reflecting your views. If you do not wish to be interviewed, we will take notes.

If you agree, we will also ask you for permission to collect material from some of your programs and observe them briefly. These observations would take a few hours over a day or two and would not disrupt the flow of the activities.

The research will be conducted by members of the research team.

The research will be conducted at a location of your convenience.

RISKS AND BENEFITS: The risks associated with this study are similar to those one may experience during interviews with journalists (including mild irritation at the researchers, boredom).

There will be no direct benefits to you or your institution. There may be an indirect benefit to your community if the research is successful in making its strengths more noticeable to those who impact it.

There will be no consequence to you if you decide not to participate or to participate only partially.

DATA STORAGE TO PROTECT CONFIDENTIALITY: The notes taken during the interviews and observations, as well as all tape recordings, will be kept in a locked cabinet at Teachers College, as well as on password-protected computer directories.

TIME INVOLVEMENT: Your initial participation will take approximately two hours. It may extend to a few more hours if you agree to follow-up interviews and other observations in your institution.

HOW WILL RESULTS BE USED: The results of the study will be used in research reports that would be published in scholarly journals and books, or presented at professional conferences. The research may be the basis of policy recommendations. In these reports every effort will be made to keep the confidentiality of the participants while accurately representing their words and their conditions.

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PARTICIPANT'S RIGHTS

Principal Investigator: **Hervé Varenne**

Research Title: **An exploratory ethnography of education an inner city neighborhood**

- I have read and discussed the Research Description with the researcher. I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the purposes and procedures regarding this study.
- My participation in research is voluntary. I may refuse to participate or withdraw from participation at any time without jeopardy.
- The researcher may withdraw me from the research at his/her professional discretion.
- If, during the course of the study, significant new information that has been developed becomes available which may relate to my willingness to continue to participate, the investigator will provide this information to me.
- Any information derived from the research project that personally identifies me will not be voluntarily released or disclosed without my separate consent, except as specifically required by law.
- If at any time I have any questions regarding the research or my participation, I can contact the investigator, who will answer my questions. The investigator's phone number is (212) 678-3190
- If at any time I have comments, or concerns regarding the conduct of the research or questions about my rights as a research subject, I should contact the Teachers College, Columbia University Institutional Review Board /IRB. The phone number for the IRB is (212) 678-4105. Or, I can write to the IRB at Teachers College, Columbia University, 525 W. 120th Street, New York, NY, 10027, Box 151.
- I should receive a copy of the Research Description and this Participant's Rights document.
- If video and/or audio taping is part of this research, I () consent to be audio/video taped. I () do NOT consent to being video/audio taped. The written, video and/or audio taped materials will be viewed only by the principal investigator and members of the research team.
- Short segments of the written, video and/or audio taped materials () may be viewed in university classrooms, meetings of professional associations or other similar settings

() may NOT be viewed in an educational setting outside the research.
- My signature means that I agree to participate in this study.

Participant's signature: _____ Date: ____/____/____

Name: _____

Investigator's Verification of Explanation

I certify that I have carefully explained the purpose and nature of this research to _____ (participant's name) in age-appropriate language. He/She has had the opportunity to discuss it with me in detail. I have answered all his/her questions and he/she provided the affirmative agreement (i.e. assent) to participate in this research.

Investigator's Signature: _____

Date: _____