

SETTINGS FOR EDUCATION IN THE INNER CITY - II

A continuing exploratory ethnography of education in an inner city neighborhood

by

Professor Hervé Varenne and Dr. Linda Lin

Teachers College, Columbia University

RESEARCH DESCRIPTION

1. This is a proposal for the second step in a larger project exploring settings for education in an inner city neighborhood. This step will focus on adults in their non-professional roles (as family members, members of church congregations, participants in any number of programs, etc.). Our main research questions are: What kind of language or discourse do adults use when describing the conditions of their lives? What kind of language or discourse do they use when attempting to change these conditions? How do they tell the stories of their transformations? The techniques used will consist mostly of observations in public, semi-public and private settings where people talk to each other about their conditions, interviews with adults, including some life history interviews, and visits to homes, clubs and other such private spaces.

This research builds on recent work by Professor Hervé Varenne (2007) 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 one setting among many. 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 people do there 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 with 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.

This project is a long term one that first took us to non-school but institutionalized settings such as after-school and social welfare programs, churches, mosques, clubs, where groups get together to develop distinctly labeled and organized activities (Gordon et al 2005). This research was approved by the Teachers College Institutional Review Board on December 21, 2006 (#07-80), and will continue in parallel to this second project.

DESCRIPTION OF HUMAN SUBJECTS POPULATION & THEIR INVOLVEMENT IN THE RESEARCH

2. Up to 50 adults will be the focus of our attention (key informants). They will be speakers of English. Gender, religion, race, ethnic background, socio-economic and health status, will not be criteria. These key informants will be entry points to small networks of closely related persons (family or household members, peer groups, etc.) that are the settings for much of the interpersonal processes that we deem educational. The final sample may include information, often quite minimal, about several hundred individuals, many of whom we will never meet personally. The key informants will be selected on the basis of a theoretical sample with an emphasis on a variety of life conditions. We intend to recruit people in the various main demographic, economic, and school achievement, categories. We expect most of the people to be, in census terms, Black /African Americans, in family households, with income of less than \$50,000, with little or no college. We will also recruit

people with more income or schooling, including professionals and the more prosperous Whites and Asians now moving in the area.

3. Participants will first be asked to respond to questions put to them in semi-structured interview format. This initial interview would last about one hour. If they are willing they will be asked for a follow-up life-history interview (for another three to four hours) and for introduction to their close networks. We will ask permission to visit some of the meetings of this networks (in households, at parties, or other settings). Given that our presence as researchers depends on the hospitality of participants, the amount of time investment will largely depend on their preferences. This might range from a few minutes to several hours.

The interviews will be audio-taped if we are given permission. If we develop the necessary trust, and after several visits, we may ask for permission to video-tape scenes in their homes or similar settings. The camera will always be visible. All people present will know that they can refuse to be taped.

4. Not applicable (our research is not about children or other vulnerable individuals).
5. The initial possible participants will be identified through contacts we will be making in various settings (including the settings that are part of the first stage of our research, e.g. churches, after-school programs, and other community groups). We will also use chance contacts made in public settings (buses, parks, restaurants, etc.). In all situations, we will use “snow ball” techniques by asking initial participants for introductions to friends, acquaintance or neighbors that might also be willing to talk with us.
6. No deception will be used.

CONFIDENTIALITY PROCEDURES

7. All data collected from interviews and observations within the institutions will be kept anonymous to everyone but the members of the research team. 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 including oral presentations in educational settings. This will be done through the use of such techniques as composite vignettes, the blurring faces and other identifying markers in visual material, and others that will anonymize the data. There will not attempt to keep confidential the name of the city (New York) or neighborhood (Harlem) within which the research will be conducted. No attempt will be made either to keep confidential the name of the major institutions that may be discussed (e.g. Columbia University, the Catholic Church, hospitals, etc.). Given the overall context of the research, its funding, and its place within Teachers College, such an attempt would be futile. Members of these institutions who may appear in our interviews or observations will be protected in the same manner as all other participants

8. All contacts will be conducted in English.

DESCRIPTION OF RESEARCH RISKS AND BENEFITS

9. The risks involved during our interactions with the participants will be minimal. Interviewing may involve such mild discomfort as boredom and irritation at the questions or interviewers. From our experience, these are rarely strong enough to interrupt the interview though, if the participant objects, the interview will immediately cease. These risks are somewhat amplified during the longer life-history interviews. The risks involved in participant-observations of larger group interactions are similarly minimal to the extent that the observer does not seek to influence the evolution of the event. There are somewhat more risks at research publication time if matters that are reported or observed are matters that the participant did not at the time of the interview or observation notice as potentially embarrassing. The anonymization procedures should mitigate this, as well as our analytic stance which do not require the linking of observations to individuals at the time of publication
10. There will be no direct benefit to the participants. In similar circumstances participants have enjoyed the opportunity to tell their stories to outsiders unfamiliar with them. We will not directly compensate the participants, but will make gifts according to the practices of the

groups of focus (when visiting, at life transitions, etc.). We will also make available our expertise with schools and other institutions to the service of the people if asked.

INFORMED CONSENT PROCEDURES

11. Potential participants will be contacted either by phone, e-mail, or in person. These early 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 exact procedures will vary depending on the type of interaction

- Brief interactions in public or semi-public situations: At such moments we will introduce ourselves as researchers and make it clear to our interlocutors that they do not have to continue talking with us. We will not ask them to sign the consent forms as this would not be practical.
- Informal and unstructured quasi-interviews, as well as more formal interviews: after an oral introduction to the project we will ask the participants to sign a consent form. (See attached “Consent form - Interviews”)
- Visits to homes and other private settings: We will follow the same process as with interviews by introducing the project to the persons inviting us and asking them to sign a consent form specifically designed for these (See attached “Consent form - Observations”). As part of this process we will ask them to make it clear to everyone to whom we might be introduced that we are researchers from Columbia and that no one is required to talk to us. We will not attempt to have everyone present sign consent forms since this would be a major disruption of the event.

Participants 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.

RESEARCH SITE

12. The initial encounters will be public or semi-public sites. Further observations may be made in homes, street corners and other such places where we will enter as guests of the persons

of focus. The participants will not be recruited through institutional representatives and we will not ask any such representatives for information about the people of focus.