



Learning In and Out of School: Education across the Globe

Conference hosted by:

Kellogg Institute for International Studies
University of Notre Dame

May 22-23, 2012

Proceedings published March 2013
kellogg.nd.edu/learning

The Anthropology of Schools, Children, and Power

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Abstract

While anthropologists have boldly gone into the realm of intersubjectivity as a focus of research and method, school research has made hardly an inroad into the problematized subjectivities that pose a gap between adult educators and children. Children's roles as agents and enablers both for and against adult-managed schools are raised. The child-centered methodological turn in inquiry is discussed as relevant to schooling, including a greater need to account for institutional dominance as a methodological barrier.

Introduction: Margaret Mead on Schools

This essay is rooted in ideas long held by anthropology, a discipline in which issues of relativism and power relations have continually held prominence. Long before child-centered research drew attention to children's perspectives and cultural agency (James and Prout 1997; Waksler 1991) and before Bourdieu (1977) and Foucault (1980) framed formal schooling as a zone of dominating power, anthropologist Margaret Mead (1943) foretold a contemporary argument: that schooling, somewhat like missionary work, is the didactic imposition of knowledge by the powerful upon the less powerful. Seven decades ago Mead drew a contrast between children's learning in homogeneous, pre-literate societies, as compared to compulsory formal schooling in technology-dependent, pluralistic societies. (A corresponding comparison was made by Lancy and Grove in 2010.) In pre-literate societies, Mead asserted, there is a continuity and agreement on the kind of knowledge needed, so children are taught skills and principles that young and old alike regard as worth learning. This implies that learners in non-technological societies seek to learn the very things adults want to teach. Recruiting students willing to learn is not an issue, and sanctions to enforce learning are not necessary.

By comparison, Mead considered that formal schooling, found in pluralist, rapidly changing, technology-driven societies, implicitly seeks to proselytize and convert students towards a particular way of knowing, one that is backed by the mature and powerful and not necessarily taken as relevant by the young. In cultural systems undergoing rapid change, relevant learning is discontinuous, and the young may not share adult assumptions about what is worth learning. Central to Mead's argument is the idea that learners in a more static, continuous society are actively attracted to what is taught, but in formal, mandatory schooling within heterogeneous, unfixed societies there is an imposed process with more emphasis on teaching and those who teach—not on the learner.

Mead's essay reveals prescient insight about issues of adultist power still ascendant in formal schooling. In complex, stratified societies, as Mead described, diverse ideas coexist about what is worth being taught. What gets taught in schools, however, tends to be knowledge backed by the privileged and influential. Just as colonists taught natives to speak a *lingua franca*, to handle money, and to thereby serve the aims of colonists, so does formal schooling impart knowledge supporting the status quo of the dominant. The fact that education also has potential to promote upward mobility and to encroach upon the interests of the powerful, Mead observed

in 1943, only intensifies the conservative direction of education on behalf of the privileged and entrenched.

Since 1943, of course, the pace of change in the world has intensified everywhere. Mead's ideas about education as a tool of the privileged, one in which teaching is imposed rather than welcomed as continuously and universally relevant, remains a very relevant concern in education. To some degree, priorities of educators are also under pressure to be flexible in order to keep up with changing technology and social demands.

The sense that schools are tools of dominance resonates with modern scholars who regard children's voices as a potentially productive force in educational reform. Referred to by the phrase "student voice," the idea of including children as shapers of education alongside parents, teachers, school administrators, and politicians has been introduced into educational debates in the United Kingdom, the United States, and elsewhere (Cook-Sather 2002). Implicitly, the idea of student voice suggests that educational planners take learners into greater account, by asking how children experience school where currently power and legitimacy are the preserve of adults. Student voice is an idea arising from a zeitgeist in which child-centered research increasingly puts the focus on children's perspectives and experiences. Recently in hospitals, patient-centered reforms have placed greater emphasis on those served *by* biomedicine (pediatric patients included) as relevant voices for making health care more effective (James and Curtis 2012). The near-universal adoption of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, with its precept to consult children in child-directed undertakings, has furthered the drive for emphasizing children's voices.

Margaret Mead recognized that education was an instrument of power across lines of social class, ethnicity, and age cohort. Formal education carries out a kind of generational domination of the young by older cohorts. That this is the case is readily documented by drawing from two sources: children's folklore (a field of continuous scholarship since even prior to Margaret Mead's era) and more contemporary research that privileges children's voices through so called child-centered inquiry. Child-centered inquiry seeks to parse social and generational dynamics *as a child experiences them*, rather than consider children as framed by adult conventions. Child-centered inquiry, unlike most school-based research, does not pursue or privilege the adult, teaching-focused stance towards schooling.

At School: Children's Perspectives

Inside classrooms, teachers and teaching materials do not necessarily strike a responsive chord resonant with children's interests and involvement. Anyone visiting a classroom will note that signs of boredom, disinterest, and self-distraction are pervasive among children. Children's propensity to doodle, daydream, or pass notes from student to student—in other words, to engage in surreptitious activities of all kinds—is ongoing behavior that is familiar to today's adults from when they were in grammar school. Children's resistance to full engagement with teacher-initiated discourse is telling. Teachers use pedagogy to convey to children what adults select as relevant. Textbooks are selected by adults based on adult-chosen criteria, without having children judge or screen the materials. Inside school, children are asked to be adult-like: to sit still, to listen, to do what they are told, to leave at home certain toys or candy. School is a place of adult dominion, in which what constitutes valued knowledge is adult imposed. It is no coincidence that formal schooling was judged by Foucault as a site where knowledge and power are so intertwined as to be referenced by a single term: power-knowledge. Adults habitually marginalize and de-emphasize young pupils by relegating children's things and children's lore to show-and-tell, or to fifteen minutes of recess. Of late, even recess is on the decline as a trend in US school policies. Boredom, and the distraction activities boredom gives rise to, are little studied in educational research (Breidenstein 2007).

Provocative insight into how school advances the separation of children from teaching comes from a book of British children's writings about how school ideally should be, in contrast to how it is (Burke and Grosvenor 2003). The writings were entries into an essay contest on the topic of the ideal school. The young writers made it clear that school is adult-dominated turf and not necessarily relevant to their predilections.

I don't see the point in going to school ... The only thing I like about going to school is P.E. and going to Bob [the school counselor]. I like going to Bob because I can draw and do whatever I like. (Boy, 12)

I don't understand why teachers ask so many questions. It seems to me that it is the learner that should ask the questions. Give us the freedom to ask questions and do us the courtesy of helping us find answers. (Girl, 14)

I think we should have a 'teach the teacher' day. We can teach the teacher how it feels to be a kid and see how hard and fast we have to do our work and so WE can set the standard. (Boy, 10)

I think teachers should not be allowed to stop you while you are working on something you like doing every so often like computer work and should give you more time for the subject of your choice. (Girl, 11)

I dream of happiness and learning united. I dream of no interruptions. If I went to my ideal school I wouldn't wake up every morning and dread the next day, the next week, the next year, and the rest of my life. (Girl, 14)

Even as early as age five, another study by Ann Sherman (1997) indicates, children feel that school is an arena tied to adults, and to children's future role as adults, rather than to kids' state of being in the here and now. School attendance is a parental dictate ("Mum says we have to go"). The purpose of school lies in distant, mature roles. Children described this when explaining the purpose of school, such as "When we grow up we need to have some way of getting pennies and so we need to go to school to find out how to do it," or "[School is] to practice for working when you're older."

Children's folklore, particularly at recess, continuously reveals a sense of suppression and domination of children by teachers and other adults at school. Folklorists, in recording the games and lore of children on school playgrounds, have had a front seat to see the entrenched embattlement and resentment towards adult authority. Songs and chants, for example, have anti-authority sentiments (Boocock and Scott 2005).

A version of the Battle Hymn of the Republic:

Mine eyes have seen the glory of the burning of the school.

We have tortured all the teachers, we have broken all the rules.

We plan to hang the principal tomorrow afternoon.

Our troops are marching on!

Glory, glory, hallelujah! Teacher hit me with a ruler.

Met her at the door with a loaded forty-four.

Our troops are marching on.

Lyrics mocking teachers make up the playground folk play of children from Belfast to Montreal. Authors such as Newall (1994) have shown that singing songs expressing resentment of teachers and school creates a community of resistance among kids. Some examples, recorded in Montreal by Newall, are passed from cohort to cohort, sometimes with slight modifications, persisting from generation to generation of children. An example is a reworked Christmas song, which has also been reported in the United States.

Deck the halls with gasoline
Falalalalala lalala
Strike a match and let it gleam
Falalalalala lalala
Watch the school burn to ashes
Falalalalala lalala
Aren't you glad you played with matches?
Falalalalala lalala

Another song from a Montreal grammar school explicitly treats the suffering of a teacher as cause for joy:

Row row row your boat.
Gently down the stream
Throw your teacher overboard
And listen to her scream.

The defiance of school authority and adult-imposed strictures has been recorded by a range of folklorists, including Beresin (2010) in a study of “yard time” at an American inner-city school. Tensions between controlling teachers and defiant students were a major pulse of school life there, and kids were accustomed to being orally hammered by teachers. A male teacher explained his philosophy of strict control this way: “You can’t be nice ... You have to be nasty. The kids have nightmares about me. They won’t come to school. [Smiles] They cry. [One aide] is ... abusive. She grabs them up. I don’t do that anymore ... After a while, they won’t respect you. It’s psychology. It’s a mind game.” Teachers there used recess as a lever of discipline, by taking away, or threatening to take away, the privilege of recess when they saw fit. One teacher’s aide warned kids as they were lining up after recess: “Two lines, or you’re staying in for next recess.” Children’s time at recess, which was regarded by kids as “free” even by

comparison to gym class, was treated as a time away from the boredom and domination of the classroom. If teacher-student relationships at this conflict-laden school bordered on sadomasochism at times, recess was the equivalent of a “safety word” by which children gained release. At yard time children freely expressed themselves, even if they sometimes got yelled at for doing so. Kids who weren’t supposed to go to recess were known to sneak out anyways. Kids said they would rather forego eating, in order to have time for recess.

In this urban school, children compared the physical and social setting—bars on the windows, pervasive rules, timed limits upon activity, and the barking out of directives—as prison-like. “Yard time” was a term for recess used by adults and children alike at school, a term from prison jargon, familiar to these inner city kids. Recess, a relative oasis in an environment fraught with constriction, served as (in Beresin’s words) as a “disordering opposite ... providing a place where the weak can feel powerful, the smart can act foolish, danger can be made safe, and both those labeled skilled and unskilled can shine with sweat.” Play is both orderly and disordering, of course, and thereby is a tool by which children edit culture. Children aren’t passively socialized without screening and reworking adults’ lessons.

Another folklore study conducted across the Atlantic in Northern Ireland (Lanclos 2003) also focused on children’s elementary school recess. Rude folklore, which predictably mocked adult strictures and ideas, served on Northern Ireland playgrounds as a delineator of social boundaries between children and adults. Out of earshot of school authority, children’s irreverent songs and play marked the unity of kids as set apart from grownups. Parents, policemen, and teachers were lampooned by lyrics in games and song.

In these varied settings, there were assorted rules imposed by adults at recess time, just as rules dominated the classroom. Such activities as cross-age play or using chalk to draw on pavement were banned prerogatives at times. All the same, recess is a time when children hold greater sway than in the classroom. They reveal themselves to be humans who creatively use available latitude to consolidate and vent their resentment of oppression.

Commercial interests appealing to children as consumers have sometimes drawn on children’s sense of onerous school restrictiveness as a basis for advertising copy. A commercial used to profitably introduce Nature Valley granola bars started with the ring of the school bell that marked the end of the day, and showed children joyously leaving school and enjoying a snack in their recovered freedom. An award-winning advertising campaign for McDonald’s

depicted school as children would imagine it at its best: Michael Jordan was the gym teacher, chocolate shakes were dispensed from the school drinking fountains, and school trips were like safaris to truly interesting places. Industry develops such commercials through child-centered inquiry rather than in conference with adult policy specialists. Businesses employ applied ethnography to understand present day youthful lives. In contrast to industry, schools, aiming to socialize adults-in-the-making, too often overlook how children define positive experience in the here and now. Schools generally regard children in the future tense, preparing them for a future of adult responsibility, a time when Freud's civilizing superego is presumed to dominate over id. Education thereby stands in opposition to fun, placing schooling at a disadvantage in earning a share of children's involvement and attention. Children show this even in their physical stance at school, such as within an urban school studied by Gilmore (1985). Gilmore describes how children's postures of stylized sulking purposefully depart from the eyes forward, upright sitting that teachers condone, a postural show of resistance. In an era of constant overtures for youth attention by marketers, media, and pop culture, adultist educators undercut their chances to win children's minds and hearts by a disregard for children's present-day, pleasure-seeking ways. In effect, the adult versus child dichotomy that upholds educators' dominance is a barrier to involved learning. Schools lose by default (in comparison to electronic media), largely because classroom pedagogy places too little emphasis on children's ongoing predilections and playfulness.

Child-centered Research

In my recent methodological book on child-centered research (Clark 2011), I stipulate that the point of child-centered research is not to obviate adult presence or perspective. It is to explore the experiences and meanings of both adults and children, and as anthropologists, to gain a richer understanding of how culture is dynamically constituted by the interplay of adults and children. Adult and child cultural experiences each merit being examined on their own terms, in order to map out the interplay between them. Michael Wyness (2012) has recently reinforced the need to remember that culture is neither owned by adults nor children, but is constituted by the interplay of subjectivities, regardless of age.

As mentioned previously, anthropologists have a track record of incorporating voices both empowered and not. I believe the field of anthropology has particular strengths that could

be widely brought to bear studying education from a student-inclusive paradigm.

Anthropologists are facile movers between one subjectivity and another. Anthropologists understand how social experience and personhood are entwined, and have shown that this can be investigated. Anthropologists also recognize that context and complexity should not be cordoned off in drawing conclusions, but that it is the holistic connection across experiences that often is most telling. As children traverse the school day, it is important to understand what happens across contexts, such as between school and home, or between classrooms, or from activity to activity (Dahl 1995). Anthropologists of education, if motivated to act upon Margaret Mead's critique that adults presume to speak for children and have an adult agenda in doing so, have skills to give a broader, child-inclusive view.

Relevant, as well, are some specific concerns that characterize efforts to study schooling. In a methodological sense, child-centered research needs to take into account the social setting of education, which can sometimes pose unique challenges.

Scholars have published widely read ethnographies about children in many non-school contexts, from street children to children's play in non-school settings. Folklorists and other child-respectful scholars have studied school recess activity particularly extensively, since this is a part of school where children's peer interactions can be viewed with minimal adult intrusion. Teens have been studied through participant observation in the halls and classrooms of schools, benefitting from the fact that young researchers can pass as and participate in the role of high-school student. But trained anthropologists generally cannot credibly pass as second graders or sixth graders. For child-centered researchers, doing research about children's cultural participation in classroom instruction and routines, and analyzing fully how both adults and children contribute to the making of classroom culture, is a complex issue.

An important barrier to doing child-centered research at school lies in the strong institutional dominance by adults. Only adults are eligible to give consent for study participation by children. Scholars negotiating with schools to do research in schools often operate at a power disadvantage. Schools are vested with the responsibility to safeguard children, but of course in the process schools often safeguard their institutional power. This can hamper attempts to gain entry to schools without allying with adult authority. Often, potential fieldworkers have to strike a bargain to do adult tasks as part of their agreement, tasks that place them, in the eyes of both children and adults, in authoritative adult roles such as tutor, teaching assistant, or supervisor.

Sarah Matthews (2003) did participant observation in an inner-city school, where she agreed to be a math tutor in order to gain entry. She succeeded in gaining rapport with students after much effort, in part because she in fact did not tutor the children very explicitly despite her agreement. She sought to be perceived as harmless to the kids by ignoring their infractions of rules, and by sitting through the classes “as much at the mercy of the teacher’s agenda as the students.” Other fieldworkers have been less fortunate, and have had to follow through on their commitments to serve in an adult, instructional role, to the detriment of gaining trust or rapport with children. The linguistic convention of calling adults in schools (even janitors) by their surnames (Mr. Jones, Miss Smith) but children by more informal first names (Joe, Christine) can contribute to children perceiving any adult as affiliated with teachers and oppressive authority (Morrow 2000).

Through reflexivity about fieldwork, child-centered researchers generally carefully plan and fine-tune the role they will adopt. Necessarily, adult fieldworkers try to occupy a somewhat liminal position—not denying that they are grownups, yet conveying a friendly, non-controlling alliance with children. Even as the fieldworker cannot afford to alienate the reigning adults of a school, it is simultaneously essential that children regard a participant-observer as unimposing. As children reflect on this issue, they sometimes raise explicit questions; they make inquiries to confirm that the fieldworker has no jurisdiction to give detention, or they test to see if the fieldworker remains mum about swearing or other breaches of adult-imposed norms.

It is easy for grownups to forget that school, like war, is a domain fraught with both boredom and subjugation to power. Bourdieu described the purpose of school as power-based, even if masquerading as nurturing. US inner-city classrooms have been called “counterfeit,” acting out a mutual child-adult charade of teaching and learning, during which children are physically present and teachers officially in charge, but in which actual learning is not underway (Matthews 2003). If school reforms are predicated on schools’ stated purpose of passing knowledge to children, progress necessitates rethinking the role of schools to buoy up adult power.

Folklorists who have studied the games and lore of children, as discussed earlier, have had a front seat to the entrenched embattlement of children under adult authority. The associational link between school and adult dominance runs deep, among kids. Child-centered inquiry, as part of a larger inquiry into adult-child interactivity, would shed light on the impact on learning of pedagogy’s tie to subjugation. Admittedly, there are methodological barriers to

such work that are not inconsequential. For an anthropologist, as an adult present in a school building, issues of child-adult power differences cannot be escaped even at the fieldwork level. Asking children to do school-like tasks, such as filling out a written questionnaire or reading aloud, my own research has found, often resonates with child-disliked school routines. In applied research, I have witnessed how former teachers, accustomed to the rigors of classroom discipline, often make poor focus group moderators since children, even away from school, pick up on their authoritative tones and become defiant. Some school inquiry, such as interviews or focus groups, may benefit from being conducted off-site, away from school personnel, using methods that are perceived as enjoyable rather than school-like.

Scholars in the past two decades have developed a myriad of models to help carry out child-appropriate inquiry. Some of the methods have been imported from applied inquiry in other fields. Geographers, for instance, have done impressive work studying community settings where children spend time, often with a rich tracing of children's associations to place. There are innovations in child-centered research used for needs assessment and project evaluation, commissioned by global and regional NGOs. NGOs over recent decades have become desirous of children's active involvement in studies, as a means to embed their first-hand views at the core of application. Participation research, in which children become co-investigators, is a trending practice in applied work to incorporate children's views.

One method of child-centered research that has widely disseminated with many accolades by researchers is called photo-elicitation (Clark 1999; Einarsdottir 2005). In photo-elicitation children take photos of their experiences that are developed prior to an interview. The photos serve as central props for the children to use as reference in sharing first-hand accounts. The benefit of this method is that children choose the focal points of interest that they think should be important, and then with minimal probing, they take the adult interviewer on a photographed "tour" of the experiences they've visually documented. A large, multi-site study using photo-elicitation would likely uncover issues of schooling that adults overlook, and in the process would provide a source of intersubjective understanding that would be beneficial knowledge for those who educate.

Another innovative method used in some secondary school settings is ESM, or experiential sampling method, in which a student is "beeped" at random times and asked to report their experience at that time. This method has the advantage of tapping felt experience as

it occurs, providing an edge in studying phenomenological states, such as boredom. Boredom can be elusive to study after the fact, but in the here and now, boredom in classrooms is common and undeniable. Consider this description from a German participant observation study of seventh- and eighth-grade classes, a study posing the possibility that boredom undermines coherence and meaningfulness during instruction (Breidenstien 2007).

Anja scratches a little with her legs. It looks as if she wants to stretch them. Otherwise, she remains absolutely still in her seat. Anja continues to play with her hair. Then she begins to play around with an index card. Meanwhile, Heiko places a paperclip chain around his neck, and acts as if he (or someone else) were strangling him. He makes a face like someone dying. Anja yawns. Heiko continues to play with his paperclips; he turns them into an arm bracelet, and then puts it around his wrist. At 1:20pm Anja asks me the time. Heiko holds the chain in front of his face, and starts making faces. By 1:21 ... the lesson is over. The students pack up.

A method I have recommended for school-related research among adolescents involves setting up a site somewhere near the school building, but not on the school's official grounds, where students can "debrief" in a place where authorities have no sway. Following up on the success of video journals kept by children, an off-site location might be equipped with a "video recording booth" where children can sequester themselves to tell about school experiences while visually recorded. Of course, ethical standards for research that support adult interests might undermine a site exclusively for children, given that parents would be the consenting parties. Within school, there is very little privacy for children who are under the watch of adults pervasively. If anthropologists give children very strong assurances of privacy, gaining their freely spoken commentary is made easier.

Conclusion

Temple Grandin, the animal specialist who revolutionized cattle management by bringing the perspective of cattle into planning and management, made ranching more productive by broadening ranchers' perspectives on cattle-human interplay. Children, at times herded through adult-designed systems at school (and in that way, parallel to Grandin's cattle) actively shape the outcomes of education in interplay with adults, contingent on kids' engagement, resistance or

cooperation. Child-centered research for the last two decades has developed ways to bring children's active investment in cultural activity into greater focus. If education is to be a vibrant system in which children's energy is focused on engaged learning rather than screening and resistance, anthropologists studying education would do well to concentrate effort on how school is experienced by children.

Adults hold influence and control in society, so it is not surprising that adults' concerns about schooling count more than children's as a rule. Still, opening a bigger lens on children's school-related perspectives could be beneficial for serving children, in a world where children are often ahead of their teachers in many of the emergent technologies of knowing. It would be unfortunate if children's viewpoints remain minimally emphasized in how policy makers and school personnel account for the institutions meant to serve children.

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The 2012 “Learning In and Out of School: Education across the Globe” conference was hosted by the University of Notre Dame’s [Kellogg Institute for International Studies](#) and cosponsored by the [Department of Anthropology](#) and the [Institute for Educational Initiatives](#), with generous support from [The Henkels Lecture Fund: Institute for Scholarship in the Liberal Arts](#), the [College of Arts and Letters](#), and the [Office of Research at the University of Notre Dame](#).

The conference, organized by Kellogg Faculty Fellow and Professor of Anthropology Susan Blum, witnessed inspiring discussion and collaboration between leading scholars of education from several disciplines and nations.

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