

The Child's Culture of Classrooms (And How To Discover It)

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Photo: Michael J. Saitta, Texas AGM Illustration

By studying child culture through children's eyes, teachers and others can better understand the behaviors and reactions of the young with whom they come in contact.

Children in classrooms constitute a unique cultural universe. All too commonly misunderstood by adults, the realities of this culture appear strikingly similar to but, in fact, sharply differ from the larger culture peopled by both children and adults. The culture of childhood in educational settings can only be known through the perspectives of children. Three classroom examples illustrate the central concept.

Example 1: A fifth-grade teacher allows her students 15 minutes each morning for what she terms a "lavatory break." This is her cultural definition of the situation, but a group of girls have discovered they have time to play in the lavatory after attending to their personal needs and have evolved no less than seven games to

become involved in during the break. They call these "water tag," "snake," "tarzan," "creepy crawler," "monkey man," "king of the hill," "king and queen," and "dare." The children distinguish between the games in terms of the physical activity they involve, the bravery necessary to play them, whether they involve sides, and the degree of risk for each game.¹

Example 2: A second-grade recess is in full swing, and the children seem to be doing a thousand different things—all at high speed. They tear frenetically about, shouting, snatching at

¹ James P. Spradley and David W. McCurdy, editors. *The Cultural Experience: Ethnography in Complex Society*. Chicago: Science Research Associates, 1972. p. 28.

other kids, and so on. Although on the face of it, the recess seems to be a complete social chaos, appearances are misleading, for the children are in fact behaving in terms of a rather complex set of cultural rules for "doing" the recess. They clearly distinguish between complicated sets (and sub-sets) of activities that they separate at the most general level into "games," "goofing around," and "tricks."²

Example 3: A seventh-grade state history class is involved in book work. A few students seem to be "on task," but a group in the back of the room is conversing in whispers. A boy in this group leans toward another boy who has his textbook open and who seems to be reading, and mutters (in saccharin tones) "Look at Martin. Martin is a school-boy!" The object of this attention winces—and, after a face-saving interval, closes his book.

The Culture of Childhood

In each of these examples we see children behaving in terms of their *culture*—culture defined as "the acquired knowledge that people use to interpret experience and to generate social behavior."³ In this sense, culture is the ideational "plans-for-action" that the children use to guide their behavior and interpret the behaviors of other children (or adults); it is the knowledge they possess for "doing" the recess, the classroom, the lavatory break (as the teacher called it), or any other educational setting. As the examples imply, the child's culture for a school setting often turns out to be very different from the teacher's. Indeed, that is our whole point. The children's culture category, "school-boy," played no part in the teacher's cultural definition of her seventh-grade classroom. It was, however, critically important to the day-to-day social dynamics of that classroom—and, from the teacher's point of view, wholly dysfunctional.⁴

The idea of a "culture of childhood," the very notion of children as "cultural beings," may seem an unfamiliar conception to some. The reasons for this are complex and can only be touched on here, but the following factors seem most important as contributors to this neglect of child culture.

1. The developmental model. The dominant scholarly model of childhood derives from developmental and clinical psychology and has been most influenced by the writings of Jean Piaget. This model is profoundly individualistic in focus, and—while theoretically powerful within its own framework—tends to desensitize its users to the sociocultural dimension of childhood. If one looks at childhood through this theoretical lens, one literally cannot "see" children's culture.⁵

2. The "common-sense" definition of the student-teacher roles. By this we refer to the persistence and power of the conventional definition of the teacher as knowledgeable, active, and superordinate; and the student as ideationally-empty, passive, and subordinate. These role-definitions have proven to have great staying power within our schools, despite several cycles of frontal assault by a variety of critics.⁶ If one looks at schoolchildren "from the front of the room," from the perspective of the standard teacher role, one is (once again) desensitized to the culture of childhood—to perceiving children as knowledgeable social beings behaving in terms of a complex cultural code.

3. The "translation competence" of children. Children live in a world dominated by adults. In a way characteristic of subordinate sociocultural groups in general, they are skillful

² Sue Parrot. "Games Children Play: Ethnography of a Second-Grade Recess." In: Spradley and McCurdy, *op. cit.*, pp. 207-20.

³ Spradley and McCurdy, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

⁴ This example derives from the observational field notes of one of the authors (Spring 1977).

⁵ For a thorough exploration of the phenomenologist criticisms of the "developmental model" in general and the theories of Piaget in particular, see: Ronald J. Silvers. "Discovering Children's Culture." *Interchange* 6(4): 47-51; 1975; Edmund V. Sullivan. "Comment: Phenomenology and Structuralism: A War of the Worlds." *Interchange* 6(4): 52-55; 1975; and T. Turner. "Piaget's Structuralism." *American Anthropologist* 75(2): 75; 1973.

⁶ See: J. Hoetker and W. P. Ahlbrand. "The Persistence of the Recitation." *American Educational Research Journal* 6:145-67; 1969; Robert Dreeben. "The School as a Workplace." In: R. Travers, editor. *Second Handbook of Research on Teaching*. Chicago: Rand McNally, 1973. p. 163.

at "translating" their cultural world into that of adults. (Sometimes adults may find the translation to be unsatisfactorily terse, as in the title of Robert Smith's popular book about children of some years past, *Where Did You Go? Out. What Did You Do? Nothing.*⁷)

Advantages of the Culture of Childhood Model

We believe that educators will find great scholarly and pragmatic advantage in supplementing the predominant "developmental" and "student" models of schoolchildren with a cultural or sociocultural model—a focus upon the culture of childhood. Let us briefly suggest some of the arguments for adopting this perspective on the life of children in school settings.

1. The existential argument. Children's culture is *there*, in the classroom and in the school, and composes a significant aspect of the social reality of school settings. We should know about it simply because it *is* there, and because that "knowledge is power."⁸

2. The argument from the necessity for control. The developmental model of childhood (and the most commonly applied model of learning, for that matter) is a clinical, "tutorial," or "one-on-one" model, while the teacher must negotiate a real-world social situation in which he or she is "one-on-thirty." The teacher is charged with controlling and directing a social milieu in which he or she is profoundly outnumbered, and desperately needs a sociocultural model of childhood and of children-in-classrooms—a theoretical lens that would allow the teacher to see the patterning of children's culture behind the surface of children's behavior, and so better predict and control that social behavior.⁹

3. The adjustment-for-learning argument. It seems obvious that teachers should know children's culture in order to adapt what they teach and how they teach to that culture. There was, for example, a real need for the teacher in the seventh-grade classroom we observed to somehow adjust her behavior to the existence of the students' cultural category, "school-boy." The necessity for adjustment to children's culture seems a simple and obvious proposition, though

one which at this point teachers are often ill-prepared to accomplish.

4. The argument from ethnicity. Unless educators are sensitized to the sociocultural dimension of school life, they literally cannot see the culture of children, and tend to interpret all phenomena in individualistic or developmental terms. And, until they can see the culture of childhood in general, they by necessity will fail to see it in particular—in its ethnic variations. There are, as we are coming to realize, important cultural differences in the way children from different ethnic backgrounds conceptualize schools, classrooms, adult-child role relationships, peer group relationships, communicative behaviors, and a variety of other things.

Various writers, for example, have pointed out that the culture of lower-class, black children differs in a variety of nontrivial ways from that of middle class, anglo-cultural patterns, whether child or adult.¹⁰ For example, this black child (or "youth") culture emphasizes verbal expression to a remarkable degree, and there is a whole repertoire of "speech forms" that are peculiar to this particular culture of childhood. Among these we

⁷ Robert P. Smith. "Where Did You Go?" "Out." "What Did You Do?" "Nothing." New York: Norton, 1957. For a general discussion of "translation competence," see: James P. Spradley and David W. McCurdy. *Anthropology: The Cultural Perspective*. New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1975. Chapter 1.

⁸ Such "knowledge" may lead directly to curriculum innovations. Southwest Educational Lab (Austin, Texas) is developing a first-grade language arts program that is based upon their local research into the forms and performance styles of children's folklore.

⁹ This is precisely the argument advanced by B. Othanel Smith, Saul B. Cohen, and Pearl Arthur. *Teaching for the Real World*. Washington, D.C.: The American Association for Teacher Education, 1969. p. 49.

¹⁰ Roger D. Abrahams and Geneva Gay. "Talking Black in the Classroom." In: Roger D. Abrahams and Rudolph C. Troike, editors. *Language and Cultural Diversity in American Education*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1972. pp. 200-202; Geneva Gay and Roger D. Abrahams. "Black Culture in the Classroom." In: Abrahams and Troike, *op. cit.*, pp. 67-84; Virginia Heyer Young. "Family and Childhood in a Southern Georgia Community." *American Anthropologist* 72: 269-88; 1970.



"How can we sensitize ourselves to the sociocultural dimensions of classroom life, and learn to see our classrooms and schools through the child's eyes?" Photo: Michael J. Sexton, Texas A&M University.

might list such folkloric patterns as "toasts," "signifying," "playing the dozens," and "soundings"; and interactional forms such as "shucking," "jiving," "rapping," and "loud talking" (or "woofing").¹¹ Several of these same writers have persuasively argued that teachers should use this black child-culture to facilitate learning.¹²

Educators who set out in search of a body of scholarship that deals with this culture, or cultures, of childhood are likely to be somewhat disappointed, though of course, there are exceptions. French sociohistorian, Philippe Ariès, has contributed a brilliant study of the radical shift in adult definitions of childhood that took place between medieval and modern times, and other scholars have followed in his wake.¹³ In perhaps the most important single work on our topic, anthropologist/psychologist Mary Goodman has done an excellent job of drawing together a variety of cross-cultural studies of the culture of childhood.¹⁴ Ronald Silvers and other sociologists at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education have been involved in a pioneering "Child Study Project," which is attempting to formulate the theoretical underpinnings of a "sociology of children's culture." The purpose here, as Silvers describes it, is to inquire

. . . into the life-world of children in such a way as to preserve their shared understandings, forms of reasoning, and experiences by displaying the world as it is revealed to them and by creating a mode of theorizing in keeping with the distinctive features of their culture.¹⁵

Finally, the folklorists, in their concern with the artistic forms and performance settings of children's folklore, have long operated with the idea of a culture of childhood, and have generated an extensive and fascinating literature that can offer many insights to educators.¹⁶

¹¹ Roger D. Abrahams. *Deep Down in the Jungle . . . Negro Narrative Folklore From the Streets of Philadelphia*. Hatboro, Pennsylvania: Folklore Associates, 1964; Roger D. Abrahams. *Positively Black*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1970.

¹² For example: Abrahams, *op. cit.*, 1970; William A. Stewart. "On the Use of Negro Dialect in the Teaching of Reading." In: Abrahams and Troike, editors, *op. cit.*, 1972, pp. 262-74; Thomas Kochman. "Black American Speech Events and a Language Program for the Classroom." In: Courtney B. Cazden, Vera P. John, and Dell Hymes. *Functions of Language in the Classroom*. New York: Teachers College Press, 1972, pp. 211-261.

¹³ Philippe Ariès. *Centuries of Childhood*. New York: Random House, 1962; Theodore K. Rabb and Robert I. Rotberg, editors. *The Family in History: Interdisciplinary Essays*. New York: Harper and Row, 1971.

¹⁴ Mary E. Goodman. *The Culture of Childhood*. New York: Teachers College Press, 1969.

¹⁵ Silvers, *op. cit.*, p. 47.

¹⁶ See: Roger D. Abrahams, editor. *Jump-Rope Rhymes: A Dictionary*. Austin, Texas: The University of Texas Press, 1969. This work illustrates the complexity and diversity of children's culture with regard to a single folklore genre. Its extensive bibliography is much more general than the title implies, and serves as an excellent introduction to children's folklore as a field of scholarship.

Approaches to Discovery

If we, as educators, accept the existence and the importance of this children's culture of school settings, the obvious next question is "How can we learn to discover it? How can we sensitize ourselves to the sociocultural dimensions of classroom life, and learn to see our classrooms and schools through the child's eyes?" This is a much more difficult—and fascinating—task than simply taking a seat in the back of the room. For most practicing educators, this must be a problem in self-training, and with that in mind, we offer the following general suggestions:

1. Believe in a culture of childhood—that it exists—and that behind what seems to be chaotic and formless social behavior (such as the second-grade recess in Example 2) there is almost always a pattern, a method behind the seeming madness, a complex structure of cultural knowledge in the minds of the actors in the setting, which guides their behavior.

2. Periodically, step outside the teacher (or administrator) role and approach the children as a fieldworker approaches culturally knowledgeable "informants." This may sound altogether too simplistic, but we have found that this role shift is much easier and much more productive of cultural information (and "rapport") than educators can possibly believe until they try it. The teacher usually has a variety of opportunities to "play fieldworker" in informal school settings outside of his or her classroom. Since this is an aspect of their culture that children are usually quite willing to talk about, we strongly suggest the investigation of the forms of children's folklore (jump-rope rhymes, games, riddles, and so on) as a point of departure for this fieldwork experience.

3. Finally, study some introductory manual of fieldwork and train yourself to take observational field-notes in terms of one or more of the suggested systems for doing so. Here we would suggest the excellent general manuals by Bogdan and Taylor, Schatzman and Strauss, and—perhaps most helpful of all to those of us who work in educational settings—the ethnographic self-training manuals developed by Frederick Gearing and Wayne Hughes (*On Observing Well: Self-*

instruction in Ethnographic Observation for Teachers, Principals, and Supervisors), and by James Spradley and David McCurdy (*The Cultural Experience: Ethnography in Complex Society*).¹⁷

These manuals set forth practical procedures for discovering the child's culture of classrooms, for learning to see those classrooms through the child's eyes. This perspective is necessary because children are not "ideationally empty"—not *tabula rasa* awaiting the next inscription of adult information. They are cultural beings acting in terms of their own complex cultural definitions of the situation—definitions that the teacher needs to discover. As anthropologist Paul Bohannon long ago pointed out, teachers like Peace Corps workers, are in a "field situation" and in the business of promoting cultural change.¹⁸ To "improve" the "natives" one must first discover what they are already thinking!

¹⁷ Robert A. Bogdan and Stephen J. Taylor. *Introduction to Qualitative Research Methods*. New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1975; Leonard Schatzman and Anselm L. Strauss. *Field Research*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1973; Frederick Gearing and Wayne Hughes. *On Observing Well: Self-Instruction in Ethnographic Observation for Teachers, Principals, and Supervisors*. Amherst, New York: Center for Studies of Cultural Transmission, State University of New York at Buffalo, 1975; Spradley and McCurdy, *op. cit.*, 1972.

¹⁸ Paul Bohannan. "Field Anthropologists and Classroom Teachers." *Social Education* 32: 161-66; 1968.



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