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Book Review - *Schooling- the Symbolic Animal: Social and Cultural Dimensions of Education*

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Schooling the Symbolic Animal: Social and Cultural Dimensions of Education
Bradley A. Levinson et al. (Editors). New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000. $81.00. 398 pp.

EDMUND T. HAMMAN, *Brown University*

This is an excellent book that brings together under one cover many of the most important ideas of the fields of anthropology and qualitative sociology of education or, to use the editor Bradley Levinson's more expansive phrase, of "the interpretive social sciences" (p. 1). The book is divided into five sections, plus an introduction and an afterword. Each section begins with an introductory essay authored by the section editor. Bradley Levinson is the author of the book's introduction and editor of the first section ("Section I: The Symbolic Animal: Foundations of Education in Cultural Transmission and Acquisition"). Section II, "Culture, Modernization, and Formal Education," is edited by Margaret Sutton, Levinson's colleague at Indiana University. Section III, "School Practice and Community Life: Cultural Congruence, Conflict, and Discontinuity," is edited by Michèle Foster. Section IV, "Cultural Production and Reproduction in Contemporary Schools," is co-edited by Kathryn Borman, Amy Fox, and Levinson. Section V, "New Directions in the Study of Culture, Learning, and Education," is edited by Margaret Eisenhart. The book finishes with an afterword entitled "Implications for Educational Policy and Practice" that is co-authored by Levinson and Margaret Sutton.

In the introduction to the whole book, Levinson clarifies that we humans are the "symbolic animal" and that physiological evolutionary adaptations have given us the capability and dependence on using language, gesture, and the other semiotic systems that have enabled social cooperation and social reproduction (i.e., replication of the culture in new generations despite the inevitability of mortality). In his words, "We are perhaps the only spe-

cies to regularly use symbols to understand and act upon the world, and we are probably the only species to systematically transmit the rules of symbol use to succeeding generations" (p. 2). He adds that because we can hardly rely only on instinct for this complex transmission, we as a species must have mechanisms for teaching and learning. For most of our species' history, however, this perquisite educational task has been replicated again and again without using the organized vehicle familiarly known as a school. Thus from a historic standpoint, we are at the beginning of an unprecedented moment; for the first time ever most humans are attending school. Despite this novelty, schooling feels both so ubiquitous and commonsensical that it is atypical not to equate education and schooling. From this paradox comes a key tenet of the book:

> [O]nly with some difficulty can we consider nonschool sites of learning properly educative. Still, our students often grow wary of the supposed educative fruits of schooling, and they pose their own worldly wise alternative: "I get a better education at my job or in the streets." "I have to leave school in order to get a real education." Such statements betray an acute awareness of the formality of institutional knowledge, of the persistent separation of schools from the vital "communities of practice" outside of them (Lave and Wenger 1991). Our task as students, educators, and educational researchers is to boldly situate the knowledge generated in schools within broader streams of social practice and learning. (p. 6)

This task stands as a coherent thread tying together all of the entries in this volume, but with the density and richness of most contributions it is easy to forget this thread. The section editors by and large do not directly return to it. So, while their introductory essays clarify their rationales for the selections included in each section, the tie back to this broader theme is inconsistent. While this is an important shortcoming of the book, it is worth remembering that a mediator (i.e., a classroom instructor) can remedy this problem.

Indeed, given that many of the most important insights in this book are elegant but complex (and told in the jargon of scholars), for "the teachers and students" (p.1) that the editor identifies as the book's target to have maximum access to this book, mediation is essential. As Levinson and Eisenhart acknowledge in the afterword with their juxtaposition of those chapters "that make the strange familiar" and those that "make the familiar strange" this one book perhaps should have been a double volume, as the pertinence of roughly half of the contributions is qualitatively different from the other half. To an audience most familiar with schooling in the U.S. and accustomed to associating education with school, the

ready relevance of the first two sections will be less obvious than the relevance of the final three sections. This is not to say that the first two sections are weaker or less important—to the contrary, some of the strongest chapters in the book are in these sections (e.g., Geertz [chapter 1], Henry [chapter 5], Rival [chapter 10], and Bledsoe [chapter 12]). Rather, I am claiming that teachers and students will more readily acknowledge the professional pertinence of chapters on home literacy practices (Heath [chapter 13]), reading group tracking (Eder [chapter 17]), or the identification/social construction of learning disabilities (Mehan [chapter 18]), than chapters on the Western Apache association of moral lessons with geographic location (Basso [chapter. 4]), on learning to be a marijuana user (Becker [chapter 8]), or on the impact of the introduction of schooling for the Huaorani of the Ecuadorian Amazon (Rival [chapter 10]). Good mediators will explore why these latter chapters matter and should generate substantive answers.

So who should read this book? The best answer is a lot of people. Because of its comprehensiveness and the quality of most of its pieces, this book deserves to become a standard text for courses in educational foundations, anthropology of education, and comparative education. Experts in the various domains of the social sciences of education should also keep this volume handy as it is a welcome mix of classic pieces worth re-reading (e.g., Cohen [Chapter 9], Heath [Chapter 13], Ogbu [Chapter 14], Vélez-Ibáñez and Greenberg [Chapter 15], Mehan [Chapter 18], and Fordham [Chapter 21]) and less well-known pieces that stand out (in addition to those I have already mentioned see Reed-Danahay [Chapter 16], Connell, et al. [Chapter 20] and Nespor [Chapter 22]). Within the various chapters there are many tiny, elegant, and important gems like Reed-Danahy's reminder about the salience of peer relationships to children's school performance. She notes that a student's peers are uniquely situated in that they know a student in both that student's domestic/community environment and at school (while parents know students primarily from home and perhaps community and teachers know students primarily only in a school setting). Similarly a quotation from Cohen's chapter stands out: "Programs that advocate changes in the modes of socialization and education must be congruent with the cultural realities for which individuals are being prepared . . . Social systems not only prepare their succeeding generations to maintain their ways of life, but they also seek to prepare their members for new conditions of life. . . ." (pp. 84–85).

By acknowledging that "school in some form is here to stay" (p. 6) and by juxtaposing key theoretical pieces about the nature of humanity and human organization with the practices of societies where schooling is new and practices of societies where schooling is deeply established, this book positions us to consider a crucial question: "What is lost and gained" (p. 5) by

the worldwide adoption of formal schooling? Though hardly a diatribe against schooling, the answers offered here get us well past the modernist conceit that schooling is unambiguously good for the individuals and groups that encounter it.

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