1 Introduction: The Challenge of African American and Youth Culture in Changing Schools

A teacher in one of my research projects—an elegant African American woman who has been a successful, urban high school English teacher of mostly African American and Latino students for more than twenty years—thinly conceals her exasperation as she struggles to apprehend why she is not being as successful with the students currently enrolled in her classes. Though they arrive at school and click off their stereo headphones resonating reggae, rock, and hip-hop, their rhythms of learning seem out of sync with a cadence of teaching that has worked well for her in the past. She has always seen herself as a catalyst for her students, enhancing the quality of their critical thinking and improving their learning skills. Now she has begun to reflect on ways to change herself and her teaching strategies in order to be more effective with this generation of students.

This teacher’s situation reflects one aspect of the challenges in education today, faced by both teachers and students. Increasingly, we see that despite numerous reform initiatives to change schools, many teachers are increasingly frustrated in their attempts to reach and teach contemporary students. At the high school level, cycles of reform have continued for over one hundred years since the “Committee of Ten” first considered issues of secondary schooling in a national context in the early 1890s (Evans & Walker, 1966). One of the committee’s recommendations—that English be required for a minimum of five hours a week for all four years—helped to establish the prominence of English in high school curricula to this day. The prominence of this subject in schools, along with the critical and ideological issues surrounding the current focus on literacy development (especially regarding marginalized groups), makes considerations and reforms for teaching and learning English particularly crucial. These issues become just as crucial in a global context, where the extensive use of English as an official or unofficial language in over sixty countries is inextricably linked to influences of imperialism and cultural domination, past and present. ¹

Among all the reform initiatives and other changes affecting the school-place, however, there is also a pervasive sense that the students themselves have dramatically changed. They are the MTV generation.
More than half of the 27.5 million teenagers in the United States own their own television sets; they have significant buying power, having spent $100 billion in 1993 alone, a 30 percent increase over 1989 (Tully, “The Universal Teenager,” Fortune magazine, 1994). They make more choices independent of their parents about the music they listen to, how they dress, where they go, and who they “hang out” with. Also, more than ever before, they come from single-parent homes. Many don’t have a sense of physical security; they worry about gang violence and AIDS, and they commit suicide in record numbers.

The teacher in my research project acknowledged that she was not aware enough of the day-to-day realities in her students’ lives, and she has not even been able to rely on her shared ethnic identity with her students to enhance her effectiveness in teaching them. They often question, resist, or reject the school knowledge that she has been positioned and sanctioned to teach. Some students do this consciously and aggressively through overt, oppositional behavior, but their attitude is also manifested in more subtle behaviors that seem to reflect a disaffection from learning.

Positionality of Students and Teachers

Signithia Fordham and John Ogbu (1986) make the case that African American culture itself is oppositional to the culture of schools. They argue that African American students associate school knowledge and official school culture with “acting white” and see this as a violation of their identification with fictive kinship norms. Bracha Alpert (1991) studied English classes in a suburban high school and argues that life in these kinds of classrooms contained significant resistance behaviors also. He noted that student resistance was linked to the teaching approach. He found that resistance was more likely to occur when the teachers’ primary emphasis in the classroom was academic subject-matter; and acceptance was more likely when students’ personal knowledge was incorporated into instruction in conjunction with a responsive style of classroom discourse.

The Fordham and Ogbu formulation suggests that the oppositional nature of African American culture in relationship to school culture is relatively fixed, based on a historically structured and enforced “castelike” position of subordination and on a perception of conflicts between the norms of their (African American) fictive kinship system and the value as well as values of schools and the larger society. But this conception of school culture does not incorporate a critique of the role of schools as an extension of the societal structures that dominate and
marginalize African American students and other groups. Instead, Fordham and Ogbu view schools as embodying meritocratic liberal ideology. Consequently, they imply that it is the nature of African American culture rather than the nature of school culture that must be changed.

Alpert’s formulation allows for more flexibility in the motives for resistance by suggesting that students’ responses of either resistance or acceptance are at least in part predicated on the specific nature of pedagogy and curriculum to which they are exposed. From this perspective, student resistance to school culture can be a focal point for developing ways to change school culture so that it serves both the lives and learning of students. It must be clear, however, that not all of the oppositional behavior of students constitutes real resistance. Henry Giroux (1983) notes that behavior is only resistant to the degree that it “promotes critical thinking and reflective action and contains the possibility of galvanizing collective political struggle” (p. 3).

Teachers, as well as parents and school administrators, need to continue to change the way they both perceive of and participate in schooling. They need to become sources of resistance themselves to the ideology and practices of cultural domination and exploitation that permeate institutional structures in this society, including its schools. One way teachers can do this is by working to better understand and to build on the authentic experiences of students who have been marginalized in and by the educational process through the creation of what Joao Viegas Fernandes (1988) calls counter-hegemonic curricula. He notes that rather than being mere instruments of propaganda, teachers can be internal sources of resistance and that counter-hegemonic curricula should be seen as internal mechanisms of resistance. Fernandes cautions that it “is necessary to take into account whether the direction of the main resultant leads to resistance against ideological inculcation or to reinforcement of the dominant ideology” (p. 175).

An important aspect of Fernandes’s notion of teachers as internal sources of resistance is also addressed by bell hooks in Teaching to Transgress (1994). She extends the focus from students to teachers in a call for teachers to create “engaged pedagogy.” She argues that the kind of dialogue and introspection needed for transformative learning can only occur when teachers themselves are working toward self-actualization in conjunction with their attempts for authentic engagement with students. Engaged pedagogies, says bell hooks, motivate both teachers and students to unmask the workings of authoritative discourses and to see how various sources of knowledge are either sanctioned or subjugated.

An additional consideration for engaged pedagogies stems from the fact that teachers in American schools are increasingly finding that they are teaching “other people’s children.” For example, the reality of many
African American students, especially in the nation’s urban public schools, is that though they are in classroom settings that are overwhelmingly populated by other African American students, more and more they are being educated by teachers from cultures other than their own. The National Center for Education Information reported in 1996 that nearly 90 percent of U. S. teachers are white and that “Even in urban schools, which have a high proportion of minority students, 73 percent of teachers identify themselves as white” (San Francisco Chronicle, October 17, 1996, A2). As Gloria Ladson-Billings cogently argues in The Dreamkeepers (1994), these considerations along with the general trends toward even greater diversity, make it all the more important for the implementation of effective instructional strategies that do not depend on the race or ethnicity of the teacher. In order to be effective, teachers will need to become more aware of their own positionality in American culture, even as they increase their awareness of and sensitivity to the diverse backgrounds, orientations, and interests of their students.

More work is needed to further clarify the historically defined and institutionally structured forces that surround and influence classroom practices. However, I will attempt to show how teachers already have considerable agency to transform key aspects of schooling by instituting classroom curricula and teaching practices that can help students to more clearly understand, effectively negotiate, and ultimately critique and change the sociocultural, economic, and political conditions that contextualize and often constrain their lives and learning. Recent reform movements are well-intentioned, but Roland Tharp and Ronald Gallimore (1988) note that such movements often do not define specific teaching practices in the classroom nor do they provide additional means through which teachers can actually improve.

I draw on findings and implications from four research projects to suggest ways that classroom discourse, curricula, and culture can be changed to enhance processes of teaching and learning by building more powerfully on authentic experiences of students. Although these suggestions are primarily directed toward high school English and college writing classrooms, I believe there are also transformative implications for other levels and subjects as well.

A Role for African American and Youth Culture

African American culture has been given a central focus in this discussion. It is not that it should have a privileged place vis-à-vis other cultural groups. However, illuminating the viability and significance of black difference is a key way of making the issue of difference significant in
U.S. schools. African American culture also has generative links to popular youth culture and therefore offers one window into understanding youth generally. Increasingly alien to adults, youth popular culture is becoming amazingly uniform in a global community of young people who listen to the same music, wear the same clothes, play the same video games, and emulate the same heroes. The links between African American and youth culture are not limited to areas such as music and sports, where black achievements and styles set world standards of excellence. They are pervasive in other aspects of culture as well and are reflected in ways of thinking, ways of behaving, and ways of being.

This pervasiveness has, in fact, caused some white parents to complain about an Afro-Americanization of their children. The issue was epitomized in a situation that occurred at North Newton Junior-Senior High School near Morocco, Indiana, when two sisters and about fifteen others “stylized” themselves by braiding their hair and wearing the kinds of baggy clothes popular with black youth. E. Jean Carroll described the resulting tensions that occurred in the town between adults and these youth (and between these youth and other youth) in an Esquire article (1994) alluding to Norman Mailer’s The White Negro (1957). Interestingly, Carroll, a white woman, consciously used a number of images and styles from black language and culture, especially the practice of signifying, to depict this town. She wrote, “It’s . . . the point where the farm belt, the Bible belt, and the rust belt intersect and the women are so homely that even the big-legged coeds of Purdue, famed nationwide for their ugliness and surliness, look like prom queens in comparison” (p. 102). One of the main points from the article was that these youth understood and were trying to escape the elemental boredom and sameness in their lives by embracing and reflecting youth cultural behaviors and styles drawn from the influences of rap and hip-hop.

Youth popular culture, however, should not be essentialized as a distinct entity unto itself which can then be neatly informed or transformed by other cultural agents. Youth are not a subgroup separate from adults; they are always in dynamic, reciprocally influencing interactions as they move inside and between multiple, variegated contexts. Ralph Cintron (1993) points out the permeability and instability of notions of boundaries within and between communities, which complicate attempts to distinctly package any particular cultural grouping. Drawing on Mikhail Bakhtin (1986), he calls attention to how communities inter-animate each other through contact that results in continual exchanges of values, behaviors, and beliefs. So, rather than seeing African American or youth cultural constructs statically, recognition is given to how their fluid and mutable qualities can contribute to the play of difference and change in society and, as I want to argue, in schools.
In The Black Atlantic (1993), Paul Gilroy explicates the embeddedness of black experiences in the developments of the modern world. This framework is also useful for exploring how intricately and co-dependently youth popular culture is embedded in contemporary Western and global cultures. A number of scholars, in fact, have provided critiques of embeddedness, rather than mere binary oppositions, of cultural systems engaging each other. In critiquing contemporary multiculturalism in “Beyond the Culture Wars: Identities in Dialogue,” for example, Henry Louis Gates Jr. (1993) argues for a perspective that shifts the focus away from just the delineation of differences between groups to the ways that group identity is dynamically constructed and positioned within historical, political, and socioeconomic contexts. In a more recent article (1995) he reminds us of Ralph Ellison’s early “insistence on the Negro’s centrality to American culture” (p. 62). In “The New Cultural Politics of Difference,” Cornel West (1990) notes that the United States through its emergence as a world power has taken center stage in the worldwide production and circulation of culture, and in so doing it has also facilitated a movement away from traditional high culture toward mainstream American popular culture. So relationships between African American and U.S. culture can clearly and quickly have global influences.

In “What Is This ‘Black’ in Black Popular Culture?” Stuart Hall (1993) critiques the possibilities (and problems) of black popular culture in terms of its potential to make a difference with respect to shifting the dispositions of power. Hall writes, “In its expressivity, its musicality, its orality, in its rich, deep, and varied attention to speech, in its inflections toward the vernacular and the local, in its rich production of counter-narratives, and above all, in its metaphorical use of the musical vocabulary, black popular culture has enabled the surfacing, inside the mixed and contradictory modes even of some mainstream popular culture, of elements of a discourse that is different—other forms of life, other traditions of representation” (p. 109). This sentence captures key aspects of the viability and significance of black difference that I believe can be built upon to make a difference in schools. In the studies reported in subsequent chapters, I attempt to show how contexts for teaching and learning can, in fact, honor and draw on elements of both cultural and personal differences of students by utilizing elements from African American communicative and cultural styles in the classroom.

A recurring feature in African American discourse and culture—the quality of motion—is reflected in the term “shooting.” This quality of rapid motion is seen in many expressions like “shootin’ the breeze,” “shootin’ the bull,” “shootin’ twenty feet of j-ism.” Clearly, a different
quality of motion is needed in initiatives for school reform, but motion nevertheless. Using “shooting” in the title of this book is congruent with my desire to harness a different quality of motion and changing its aim in much the same way that the book’s overall focus is toward harnessing some of the power of African American and youth discourse and culture and focusing it for productive use in schools. I understand how many of the more visible school reform initiatives have appropriated the use of the term “excellence.” But, as Mike Rose (1995) notes in Possible Lives, “we operate with inadequate, even damaging notions of what it means to be ‘excellent’” (p. 3). I don’t want to lose sight of goals for excellence, but I want to illustrate alternative paths that permit elbow room for varied cultural and participatory styles as well as more mediums and strategies for representing knowledge.

Ultimately, a key premise of this book is the possibility for more shareable cultural worlds reflective of Toni Morrison’s critique of this idea in Playing in the Dark (1992). The idea is intricately linked to notions of excellence that encompass equality as well as quality. I argue that aspects of popular youth culture can act as unifying and equalizing forces in culturally diverse classrooms and that African American and youth cultural sources for curricula can motivate learning of traditional subject matter as well. Through the research presented, I explore how some teachers make viable connections between streets and schools to create more shareable cultural worlds for learning.

I begin by looking at a program for youth development that takes place in a setting outside of school. In Chapter 2, I present an ethnographic study completed in 1992 that assessed the language and literacy development of young African American males through interactions with their coaches and other volunteers in a community-based sports program on the South Side of Chicago. The study revealed a number of intriguing literacy activities and significant language competencies that occurred in this sociocultural context outside of school. These community language styles and literacy practices were probed to provide understanding of how some cultural competencies are produced and to lay a foundation for further examining ways to build on these and other youth competencies and interests in schools. As a researcher as well as a former Chicago public school English teacher and college writing instructor, I was interested to see how the discourse strategies and social interactions found to be effective in this out-of-school setting might have potential for increasing the efficacy of teachers in schools.

I subsequently designed and instituted three other research projects presented in Chapters 3, 4, and 5 that explored how classroom teachers could build on features of African American and youth discourse and
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culture to transform the style and content of classroom discourse and learning. Since these studies were situated in educational settings that were culturally diverse, I also explored how some features from African American and youth discourse and culture could work to help foster cultural understanding and equality between different cultural groups. In Chapter 6, I conclude by synthesizing significant findings and implications from all four studies to set forth a direction for reform and a vision for “New Century Schools” that can incorporate and build on America’s cultural diversity to inform and empower students.

Theoretical and Methodological Considerations

The central theoretical considerations that underlie these studies are drawn from the work of Paulo Freire, Mikhail Bakhtin, Lev Vygotsky, Brian Street, Bernardo Ferdman, James Paul Gee, and Thomas Kochman. Key methodological considerations come from the work of Dell Hymes, Shirley Brice Heath, and Courtney Cazden. Conceptual contributions also come from Christina Haas’s work on the symbiotic relationship between writing and technology and from Toni Morrison’s work on decoding the challenges that blackness presents to American literature and culture in Playing in the Dark. Additionally, Theodore Sizer’s work (1984) on a coaching model of school reform is significant to these studies.

The metaphor of coaching has gone well beyond the realm of athletics to become a key construct of reformers in education, medicine, and business in their efforts to reshape traditional institutional structures. In education the idea of “teacher as coach,” has been used to model a fundamental reorientation of the roles, relationships, and responsibilities of teachers and students. It characterizes an orientation toward teaching and learning that is centered more on active student involvement reflected in code words such as collaboration, cooperative learning, reciprocal teaching, mentoring, scaffolding, cognitive apprenticeships, peer tutoring and peer response, project-based learning, and serious learning games. Though it cannot be limited to any one reform movement, this metaphor is closely associated with the Coalition of Essential Schools, a national reform movement headed by Sizer. This movement was recently awarded a grant of $50 million to further develop and extend its comprehensive coaching model of teaching.

The Coalition School model clearly addresses the limitations of schooling organized along the lines of a workplace model. In Horace’s Compromise (1984), Sizer noted that “We talk about ‘delivering a service’ to students by means of ‘instructional strategies’; our metaphors arise from
the factory floor and issue from the military manual. . . . [W]hile we know that we don’t learn very well that way, nor want very much to have someone else’s definition of ‘service’ to be ‘delivered’ to us, we accept these metaphors” (p. 3). Sizer’s reconceived metaphor for schooling captures part of the dilemma of students positioned as “objects” in the educational process. Yet, the ultimate focus of his reform initiative to improve the general quality of student learning stops short of reconceiving students and reforming education to help empower them in the sense that Freire gives to empowerment as “subjects” with the critical capacity to transform their reality (1970). For Freire, “subjects” know and act while “objects” are known and acted upon. Therefore, beyond the accumulation of information and the development of specific technical skills, learning should be a process of becoming conscious of how one’s personal and group experiences are situated within and constructed by particular historical conditions and power relationships. Empowerment, then, is the positioning of “subjects” to challenge and change unequal power relationships. Interestingly, the coaching practices and perspectives in the community sports setting that I observed were not only viable for the development of athletic and academic skills, they also revealed a variety of ways that coaches and other community volunteers attempted to develop these youths as critical and conscious actors in the world beyond sports. This focus on the social development of these youths was designed to both authenticate and significantly expand their experience and perceptions. It attempted to use their desire to effectively engage in sports to help them see possibilities to more effectively engage the world. The sport program’s director, formerly a volunteer coach for nine years, summed up this endeavor by saying, “I think we are trying to develop a program here that uses athletics as a way to get to the minds of these youngsters.”

In many ways, their goals for these youths were consistent with Freire’s notion of the need to move people beyond merely “living” to “existing” in the world, where “existing” for him included development of a critical capacity. So, I focused on the mentoring relationships as well as the language use of both players and coaches in dialogic interactions. I argue that a close examination of the nature of communicative and social interactions that engaged youths in this setting helps to clarify some of the transformative possibilities for teachers as “coaches” engaging students in schools.

I recognize that there are potential problems in using the communicative and social relationship development from this setting to illuminate possibilities for schooling because of the fact that much of the interaction was between men and boys. All too often there has been the ten-
dency to use male-generated or male-dominated models as if they were equally applicable to the issues and situations that females face. This “shortchanging” is particularly pronounced in schooling. For example, The American Association of University Women (AAUW) Report (Style, 1992) notes that “[t]he absence of attention to girls in the current education debate suggests that girls and boys have identical educational experiences in school. Nothing could be further from the truth” (p. 3). Significant findings from the numerous research studies in the AAUW Report reveal how girls have very different experiences and get substantially different treatment while in the same educational settings as boys. Depending upon how it is used, even the metaphor of coaching may privilege males in subtle and not so subtle ways. Yet, I believe that some of the practices and principles revealed in the community sports setting that I assessed can effectively contribute to new styles and strategies for teaching and learning that serve the developmental needs of both girls and boys.

My methodology for assessing language and social interactions in this setting was based in Hymes’s work on the ethnography of communication as well as the work of others who have built on Hymes, especially Muriel Saville-Troike. I found that these communicative interactions incorporated a wide range of youth options or “Speaking Rights” that were characterized by being dialogical and receiver-centered, expressive and assertive, playful and colorful, as well as spontaneous and performative. While reflecting important aspects of black language styles as delineated particularly by Kochman, these interactions also revealed the intricate competencies—the on- and off-court voices—being developed and reinforced in these youth.

Bakhtin’s work gives texture to the social, historical, dialogical, and multivocal qualities of “voice,” and it is helpful in understanding why the “Speaking Rights” that facilitate African American youth in finding voice on the courts may have difficulty finding their way into discourse in schools. For Bakhtin, language enters life and life enters language through utterances that constitute the various types of primary and secondary speech genres and reveals the ways that national language is embodied in the language of individuals (1986). He notes that “The very interrelations between primary and secondary genres and the process of the historical formation of the latter shed light on the nature of the utterance (and above all on the complex problem of the interrelations among language, ideology, and world view).” Examination of the dynamic between primary and secondary speech genres, then, can also reveal ways that the voices of some individuals and groups are embodied while others are subjugated in the national language.
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In addition to Bakhtin, the theoretical contributions of Vygotsky offer provocative insights into the nature of language, learning, and social development, and some of these insights are applicable to the community sports setting that I studied. Vygotsky’s work on relationships between cognition, speech, and social interaction attempted to explain how children develop by appropriating new forms of discourse and thinking through interactions with others. His emphasis on the role of social practice in youth development is important to the discussion of coaching perspectives and practices in the community sports setting as well as to discussions of schooling. In the community sports setting, I show how the coaches’ circle operated as a kind of zone of proximal development in which young players appropriated and practiced forms of discourse and thinking through interactions with adult coaches as well as with their peers.

While communicative events were shaped by talk that occurred both inside and outside of the coaches’ circle that was primarily the province of men volunteers, literacy events were structured into this sports context by members of the program’s parents’ council, consisting primarily of women volunteers. As the communicative event as defined by Hymes was the central unit of analysis for language and social practices, the literacy event as defined by Heath (1982) was the central unit of analysis for these literacy practices.

The parents’ council organized a number of activities throughout the season, and literacy events were often incorporated into them. But players also engaged in an array of activities on their own, which revealed highly sophisticated, spontaneous and adaptive literacy practices, “Reading Rites,” that were tied to personal interests motivated by sports discourse. This was the kind of adaptive learning that Heath and McLaughlin (1987) noted “comes most compellingly through direct need and experience rather than through moral or didactic precepts handed on from others.” Both the structured and adaptive literacy practices that occurred in this community sports setting offered insights into competencies predicated on youth experiences that I believe can be connected to new ways of thinking about learning in school.

Brian Street contributes important considerations to a framework for viewing literacy development in the community sports setting as well as in school. In Literacy in Theory and Practice (1984) and in Cross-Cultural Approaches to Literacy (1993), he debunks the notion of literacy learning having universal consequences for people by illustrating the significance of social institutions and the socialization process in constructing both the meanings and practices for specific cultural groups. He shows how these meanings and practices can and do change dramatically from one
social context to another. Consequently, he proposes an “ideological” rather than an “autonomous” model of literacy development. In viewing literacy learning as culturally based, Street calls attention to the fact that people—who they are and how they live—make all the difference in how they will learn and how they will engage in literacy practices.

In an article in the *Harvard Educational Review*, Bernardo Ferdman (1990) adds to Street’s framework on the social nature of literacy specific considerations for looking at ways that literacy and culture reciprocally influence each other at the level of the individual. His clear focus on the connections between literacy and culture with respect to the individual learner has direct bearing on how I attempt to draw implications from a cultural model for the literacy learning of individuals in schools. In noting how literacy learning is linked to cultural identity, Ferdman writes that it “both derives from and modulates the symbolic and practical significance of literacy for individuals as well as groups” (p. 182). He defines cultural identity for individuals as the images of behaviors, beliefs, values, and norms that each person maintains as appropriate for members of the ethnic group to which she or he belongs. Ferdman’s work poses a key question, and it is useful to see how this book addresses the same question: “How can teachers and other educators better acknowledge their students’ cultural identity and consider it in planning and providing more effective literacy education?” (p. 201). James Paul Gee also delineates how literacy learning is culturally based, and his work suggests particular ways that the culturally based styles of language and literacy development in the community sports setting can be related to a model for teaching and learning in schools. In a paper entitled “Learning and Reading: The Situated Sociocultural Mind” (1995), Gee cites extensive work in cognitive science and the philosophy of mind to support a progressively more accepted notion that the human mind is, at root, a pattern recognizer. Through citing the work of Nolan (1994), Gee further establishes that in acquiring concepts “learners must have both lots of examples (experience) and must uncover the patterns and sub-patterns in those examples which are the ones explicated by their socioculturally-situated theories.” Gee builds from these concepts to show how learning may be specifically “situated” in sociocultural experiences.

Since the world is infinitely full of potentially meaningful patterns and sub-patterns in any domain, something must guide the learner in selecting which patterns and sub-patterns to focus on. And this something resides in the cultural models of the learner’s sociocultural groups and the practices and settings in which they are rooted. *Because* the mind is a pattern recognizer, and there are infinite ways to pattern features of the world, *of necessity*, though perhaps ironi-
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cally, the mind is social (really cultural) in the sense that sociocultural practices and settings guide the patterns in terms of which the learner thinks, acts, talks, values, and interacts. (p. 3)

Here Gee identifies the significance of cultural models in mediating the learning of individuals and later notes that this happens in ways that do not negate individual agency. This mediation of learning is through what Gee calls midlevel patterns or “representations” that he calls situated meanings. Gee’s formulation provides insights into what I believe is key work for teachers in transforming schools. It involves teachers becoming aware of the situated meanings (the diverse ways of representing) that students bring to schools and working to understand those situated meanings in terms of the various cultural models that motivate them as a foundation for student learning. But I also believe teachers should go beyond this to exposing students to additional situated meanings through engaged pedagogies and counter-hegemonic curricula that help students to comprehend and critique how the patterns in some cultural models work either to subjugate or to liberate people, thereby increasing their consciousness of the forces that influence their lives.

Cultural Models and Models for Teaching

In Chapter 3, I begin to detail a model of teaching and learning that brings perspectives from the community sports setting into the setting of school. It connects the development of “Speaking Rights” and “Reading Rites” in Chapter 2 to an exploration of culturally and individually inscribed “Writing Differences” and their significance to developing critical literacy. In order to conduct this teacher/research project, I arranged to teach a section of college writing at the University of California in the fall semesters of 1993 and of 1994. I configured each class so that the majority of both males and females were scholarship athletes who in many ways were underprepared in high school for the academic demands of college, especially in the area of writing. About half of the students in these two classes were African American while the other half was composed of Asian, Latino, and white students.

I designed this study to use both structured and adaptive language and literacy practices like those revealed in the community sports setting and to incorporate a diversity of youth cultural interests and competencies to motivate literacy learning. This study shows how these students’ writing voices and overall literacy development turned on an axis of cultural identity and individualized representations that were intricately linked to their unique backgrounds, experiences, and interests. This study was also predicated on my belief that underprepared stu-
dents could be greatly helped in their writing development through computer-mediated writing instruction. I had noticed the considerable competence and lack of anxiety in manipulating complex computer games demonstrated by the young players I had studied in the community sports setting. The most successful of these games offered a high degree of challenge and a sense of empowerment for the players. I reasoned that my students’ writing would improve and that their learning to use computers would not be hindered by any lack of willingness to engage the technology.

Therefore, I established a theoretical framework for teaching and learning based on considerations of youth development in the community sports setting, a model that blended perspectives from Freire, Bakhtin, Vygotsky, Street, Ferdman, Gee, and Kochman. Additionally, I built on the work of Christina Haas (1995) and what she calls the “materiality of literacy.” Essentially, she draws on the work of Vygotsky to help articulate the role of material tools like computers in the process of writing. She argues for a view of writing as a practice embodied in culture, in mind, and in the physical body and posits that writing and technology work in a symbiotic relationship. Her analysis clarifies how technologies are not just tools for individual use but are culturally constructed systems as well, manifesting the ideology and values of the society. Within this framework, Chapter 3 looks at ways that literacy development and writing specifically of underprepared students can be mediated through the use of computers.

In conjunction with a coaching model of teaching, I assumed the perspective of teacher as ethnographer, which I feel offers a transformative approach to teaching even when a teacher is not doing formal research. If students change dramatically, teachers need to have the perspective to engage students at whatever point they are in that change. As Lisa Delpit (1988) notes, “We must learn to be vulnerable enough to allow our world to turn upside down in order to allow the realities of others to edge themselves into our consciousness. In other words, we must become ethnographers in the true sense” (p. 297). In my study, this perspective also came to represent attempts to learn as much as possible about the students being served by simultaneously sourcing and challenging the various cultural models on which their experiences and perceptions were patterned.

Doing ethnographic research in classes, however, can involve more than adopting a particular researcher perspective. In an article entitled “Informing Critical Literacy with Ethnography,” Gary Anderson and Patricia Irvine (1993) note that “ethnographers can select unique instances of a teaching method and submit them to intense scrutiny, thereby pro-
viding us with case study data of the processes and problems associated with various approaches to critical literacy” (p. 83). They further note that “[t]he intersection of language and power in school makes language and literacy contested terrains” (p. 83). My study of these underprepared college students and the cultural and academic contexts that often work to constrain their lives and learning helped to illuminate ways in which moving them toward literacy also moved them across ideologically contested terrain.

In Chapters 4 and 5, I extend the book’s focus on transforming teaching and learning to high school English classrooms and to issues beyond literacy and writing development. Since the most fundamental and important functions of schools are achieved through communication, an important task of the two studies on which these chapters were based was to discover and describe patterns of communicative interactions in terms of how they affected learning in the classrooms. Courtney Cazden’s Classroom Discourse (1988) provided additional tools that built on Hymes’s earlier work for this kind of analysis in schools. Beyond being the principal vehicle for learning, classroom discourse carries cultural cargo as well. Consequently, the nature of classroom discourse is intricately linked to the whole of class culture, and it is revealed in the various ways that teachers and students construct the day-to-day reality of classroom life together. Chapters 4 and 5 look at both official and unofficial discourse in class to assess how the interests, attitudes, obligations, and rights of students and teachers are crystallized in these complex social systems.

Chapter 4 is based on a study of a public high school in the San Francisco Bay Area completed in 1995 which, among other things, featured a curricular intervention in one of the English classes that attempted to teach students to both critique and produce various kinds of texts stemming from African American youth culture and youth popular culture in conjunction with other more traditional texts found in school. This school was also going through the process of de-tracking all of its English classes in an attempt to change some of the institutionally structured differences among its various groups of students. The issues of tracking are especially charged because significant research has shown their detrimental consequences for certain populations of public school students, especially African American students who are disproportionately represented in low-ability groups and low-skilled vocational tracks (Oakes, 1985). So, Chapter 4 also examines aspects of this process as an attempt to change structural as well as interpersonal relationships in the school.

Chapter 5 is based on a study completed in 1993 of two English class-
rooms in a Chicago public high school. It assessed the pedagogy and curriculum already in existence in two of these classes. Specifically, my study looked at the instructional styles of two teachers of senior English. One teacher made a conscious and continuous effort to link literature to students’ lived experiences while the other teacher initially did not. Like the study in Chapter 4, this study also revealed ways that popular youth culture as well as aspects of African American culture could be built upon in schools to motivate learning, including unique ways of learning some texts that are traditionally taught in American high schools. Students were able to use African American and youth cultural materials in personal identity quests as well as to better understand larger societal concerns. Essentially, students were able to probe issues in a variety of texts that attracted or intersected with their interests enough to sustain their investigation beyond merely superficial readings. In the process they were able to model some of the textual strategies to make more informed readings. The process allowed students, as one teacher aptly noted, “to really look within themselves and grow.”

In Chapters 4 and 5, then, I continue to use the theoretical formulations of the researchers discussed earlier, which were helpful for understanding the sociocultural nature of language and the literacy practices in the community sports setting as well as in the college writing class. These formulations were useful for focusing on students’ learning with respect to specific textual materials and with respect to the dynamic social, dialogic, and power relationships that exist between students and teachers, and among students. Studying these dynamics within these frameworks illuminated problems and possibilities for critical learning through the discourse and culture generated in these high school classrooms. The particular classes and school sites in Chapters 4 and 5 were also selected because they represented the high levels of ethnic and cultural diversity that is coming to characterize the United States. So, these two studies add to the investigation begun in Chapter 3 of ways for “Changing Classroom Discourse and Culture,” both in terms of how the nature of urban classrooms is changing in response to difference, and also in terms of how educators themselves can effect change to accommodate difference.

Engaging the Play of Difference and Change

In Playing in the Dark, Toni Morrison analyzes how complexities of difference have been primarily posited in relationship to a white (usually male) conceptualized “first principle”—white supremacy—in language, literature, and life. First-principle intentions are often revealed in two
broad strategies used to conceive of and control the play of difference—attempting to make it either invisible or oppositional. In oppositional mode, for example, blacks are seen as the opposite; the “other” of whites; nonwhites; or just as patronizingly, defective whites. These xenophobic reactions are also extended to other people of color, as well as to other groups that the society attempts to marginalize. Ultimately, both strategies hide rather than reveal the actual play of difference and work to make the requisite conditions for difference to defer.

Yet, there can be additional responses to difference beyond ongoing attempts to make it oppositional or invisible. This is partially seen in the current high visibility of certain aspects of African American culture. When picking up a newspaper or turning on the television or when strolling through a shopping mall, one undoubtedly sees ads like those from a foodstore chain in California saying, “Chill out at Andronico’s”; or from Ben and Jerry’s Ice Cream Company requiring candidates for their top position to write an essay under the title, “Yo! I’m your best CEO”; or from The Young Shakespeare Conservatory (endorsed by the San Francisco Chronicle), whose poster features a picture of Shakespeare “crossed up” in a rapper’s pose over the words: “Meet the Grandaddy of Rap.”

The extent that media, business, and even politics exploit the images, icons, music, and discourse of African American culture to contextualize and legitimize their ideas and messages is fascinating. The extent to which educators often filter these elements out of school settings is equally fascinating. In the grip of market forces, styles from black language and culture are used to sell everything from cars to cola. Admittedly, these kinds of responses often do not reflect substantive changes in power and perceptions. Merely repackaging difference for mass consumption as a commodity is not progress. But culture is complex, and in the cycle of transformations from cultural experience to commodified culture and back to individualized cultural experience, educators have to be able to sort out and value displays of cultural authenticity that are productive for learning and literacy.

Ultimately, it is just as important for educators to recognize and work against the differential opportunities and patterns of treatment predicated on race and ethnicity as well as on class and gender, which have been so extensively documented by recent research. New strategies for teaching and learning cannot be isolated from these central, enduring problems of inequality, which are all too often fostered in American schools and society. Beyond merely acknowledging cultural differences, schools must be able to incorporate multiple perspectives and practices that work and are valuable because they are reflective of diverse, colorful patterns that make up the fabric of American life.
Though underprepared or underachieving students are often central in the studies presented in this book, the purpose for looking at them was not only to find ways to bring them up to the levels of achieving groups. That perspective ignores basic problems with the content and structure of American education generally, which is failing to reach and challenge a generation of youth alienated from schooling at significant levels. This alienation is complicated, and perhaps facilitated, by the fact that as we move into the next century, significant demographic change is merged with a dizzying creation of new knowledge. By the year 2000, for example, Asians will increase by 22 percent, Hispanics by 21 percent, African Americans by 12 percent, and whites by 2 percent (Mehan, Hertweck, Combs, & Flynn, 1992). Also, by the year 2000, the knowledge base will expand exponentially with the impact of networked computers, significantly changing how information is used. In light of these possibilities, what new content areas will become imperative? What new intelligences and modes of learning will be needed to access them? What new skills will be required to filter and use pertinent information from the overwhelming quantities available in both disparate and integrated combinations of text, image, and sound?

Clearly, schools need to modify their focus on the mastery of content at a time when the possibility of content mastery is becoming obsolete. Reformed educational structures and processes will have to be immensely flexible to incorporate the changing cultural forms and products driven by changes in demographics, economics, technology and ultimately by changes in power and interpersonal relationships. These new structures must be able to reflect and facilitate improvisation and spontaneity while they encourage stylization and self-conscious expression. They must also find ways to continually subvert and extend perceived limits in a relentless pursuit of excellence—excellence that is defined in part by its relevance to the constituencies being served.

The impetus of diversity and change cannot be reconciled in the stances of E. D. Hirsch (1987), Harold Bloom (1987), and others who argue that schools should transmit a specific and highly immutable body of knowledge encapsulated in an authoritative set of books and references that they have defined as most representative of the American tradition. Mike Rose (1989) acknowledges this impulse in education as the seeking of “a certification of our national intelligence, indeed, our national virtue, in how diligently our children can display this central corpus of information.” James Moffett (1992), on the other hand, suggests that rather than learning what a field has established, students must learn how practitioners in the field come by this knowledge. Instead of emphasizing the transmission of a specified body of informa-
tion, the focus must shift to skills for accessing, valuing, and synthesizing increasingly equivocal information in conjunction with the critical skills needed for its interpretation and application.

New Century Schooling

In the last chapter I suggest what I believe are guideposts in a quest for a mutable curriculum and pedagogy for teaching it—mutable to meet the needs of the diverse student populations that comprise America’s schools; mutable to encompass the fluid, rapid production of new knowledge with its increasingly transitory applications.

These guideposts reflect some of the challenges posed by African American and youth culture to our schools, which must change to meet those challenges. To meet the challenges, educators must examine ways that dialogical, receiver-centered language styles and adaptive literacy practices within a coaching/mentoring/modeling perspective in the community sports setting can inform strategies that effect change in classroom discourse, curriculum content, and class culture so that student voice and consciousness is enhanced through more critical and authentic learning and literacy development. They must examine principles and practices of teachers as ethnographers who source students’ varying sociocultural backgrounds, experiences, and interests to better understand, use, expand, and blend the cultural models that pattern their perceptions. They must also recognize technological mediation of learning as embodied practices, which can either facilitate or constrain student development, depending on the pedagogical perspectives that determine how and what technology is used. Finally, educators must approach change from a perspective that teachers have agency to subvert socially constructed limits on human development by changing the very schools in which they work to better serve the lives and learning of students.

I present this model of teaching and learning in the form of a scenario of one classroom in one high school projected about a decade into the future. In connecting implications and findings from the other studies to particular features in the model I illustrate ways that a possible future is in process now. First, the subject areas themselves are significantly changed. For example, in place of four years of English, the school has a core requirement for fundamental literacy in language and communication(s). Students are given a foundation in American and world literatures, but the focus of their fundamental literacy in this area is on developing competency in and understanding of the issues and problems of language and communication including different forms and
uses of language within varying sociocultural and political contexts. Five Fundamental Literacies: math and logic; science and technology; language and communication(s); culture and human development; and aesthetics and values are at the center of the school’s curriculum and the content of these courses are continually revised by a school Faculty Curriculum Committee for each fundamental literacy. These five curriculum committees along with a Committee on Motivation, Instruction, and Assessment establish the intellectual direction and content of learning for the entire school. There are many other elective courses, but these five, year-long courses are required to be passed by all students. Students take one fundamental literacy core course in the second year, two in the third year, and two in the fourth year. Additionally, they are encouraged to take advantage of the year-long internship programs in government, businesses, health organizations, and community organizations. Inside these structural changes, however, the scenario gives a view of how teaching and learning can take place, thus extending principles and practices from studies in this book to a vision of new century schooling. It shows pedagogical strategies and curriculum projects operating to motivate students and help them develop fundamental skills to access, select, analyze, synthesize, and interpret information in a quest to understand themselves in relationship to others and how they all are dynamically positioned in social, political, and physical space. The key class in the scenario revolves around collaborative projects that culminate in performative, multimedia presentations that require active and integrative participation. It shows how the teacher’s coaching, modeling, and motivation efforts provide springboards for the leaps of imagination in the students and how the project assignments allow elbow room for representation of the unique concerns and issues that flow from the variety of background experiences and interests of each student. In so doing, the students actively co-create the curriculum’s content, and help make it relevant for understanding the circumstances of their lives. Classrooms and schools must ultimately be understood within the larger sociocultural, economic, and political context of society. The studies presented in this book also illustrate ways that teachers can have considerable agency to transform school discourse and culture by honoring and sourcing diverse cultural experiences and interests of students to bring about more critical learning. They show how some teachers are shooting for excellence in American schools by preparing students to effectively negotiate and constructively change the increasingly complex world they will inherit and inhabit.
Note

1. The *Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language* (cited in Pennycook, 1995, p. 36) notes the following:

   English is used as an official or semiofficial language in over sixty countries, and has a prominent place in a further twenty. It is either dominant or well-established in all six continents. It is the main language of books, newspapers, airports and air-traffic control, international business and academic conferences, pop music, and advertising. Over two-thirds of the world’s scientists write in English. Three-quarters of the world’s mail is written in English. Of all the information in the world’s electronic retrieval systems, 80 percent is stored in English. English radio programmes are received by over 150 million in 120 countries.