Human Capital or Human Connections? The Cultural Meanings of Education in Brazil

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Background/Context: *In the field of educational research, conventional wisdom holds that primary-level schooling, specifically literacy acquisition, promotes economic mobility for individuals and economic development for the nation. This belief is rooted in human capital theory, the causal argument claiming that state investment in schooling or training increases worker productivity and therefore workers' incomes, owners' profits, and (ultimately) national development through economic growth. The idea that literacy instruction yields economic and other forms of development, which features widely in global educational policy documents, constitutes what anthropologist Brian Street called an "autonomous" model of literacy, one that suggests that literacy instruction results in automatic "effects" on individual and national economic development.*

Focus of Study: *Arguing against human capital theory and other autonomous models of literacy, this article reveals how the outcomes of literacy schooling are mediated by complex social interactions and by the meanings that students attach to schooling.*

Research Design: *This article draws on 24 months of ethnographic research with highly impoverished literacy students from four literacy programs in two Brazilian cities.*

Findings/Results: *This article shows three things. First, the students interviewed for the study talked about education not only as book learning and formal study but also as sociability and manners. Second, they said that sociability and manners derive, in part, from schooling. Third, the students consistently remarked, and my observations confirmed, that the economic opportunities that attendance at school opened for them were the product of their development as "educated" people, which contributed to their efforts to extend and maintain social networks.*

Conclusions/Recommendations: *The data presented in this article suggest a need to reconsider key theories and dominant discourses about literacy and economic development that, rooted in human capital theory, predict a tight, causal link between learning to read and write and*

improved economic opportunities. Instead, I argue that the social, political, and/or economic benefits of literacy must be examined in light of a sociocultural, interactional model of education.

"My mother was poor. She never went to school.
But she was the most educated woman I ever knew."
Antonia, a basic literacy teacher[1]

"Education means knowing how to enter and how to leave."
Eunisa, a literacy student

"Sure, school helps you get ahead. When I was in school, I met a guy who was driving taxis. That's how I got my job."
João, a taxicab driver

INTRODUCTION

Research in the field of education is too often limited to studies of schooling, despite admonishments from anthropologists to consider education as a broad sociocultural process extending well beyond the institutions of formal, and even informal, education. Such myopia causes educational researchers to miss important educational practices altogether.

In this special issue, Hervé Varenne (2007) argues that the field would be better served by a definition of education as *interaction*. Drawing on Lawrence Cremin, Varenne defines education as deliberate "efforts to change one's consociates" (p. XX) **<PAGE NUMBER NEEDED>**Such efforts include the attempt to modify, in some way, the person with whom one is interacting, as well as the self-modifications that one makes in responding to one's interlocutor. Strongly influenced by Garfinkel and other ethnomethodologists, Varenne encourages researchers to attend to the complex educational work entailed in quotidian social interaction.

In this article, I argue that one important advantage of considering education as interaction is that it requires us to attend carefully to the meanings that people ascribe to education and the ways in which those meanings influence the differential outcomes of schooling. Too often, contemporary research in the field of education ascribes autonomous "effects" to schooling, as if schooling had some causal, consistent impact. Such assumptions are particularly prevalent in studies influenced by human capital theory, which posits a link between basic schooling and economic development. Yet ethnographic analyses of education and schooling reveal a much more complicated picture in which outcomes of schooling are mediated by complex social interactions that shape and are

shaped by the ways that students and teachers understand and interpret schooling and, more broadly, education.

Drawing on 2 years of ethnographic research in Brazil, this article examines how youth and adult literacy students talked about schooling and education, and how their specific concepts of education influenced the economic outcomes of schooling. The poor and working-class students in these urban literacy programs discussed *educação* as the broad and highly valued social ability to get along with other people, and they ascribed the development of such sociability in part to formal schooling. Perhaps most important, the students I worked with were convinced that whatever economic mobility was to be had from formal schooling would come through either the social networks they developed at school or the sociable persona they cultivated through schooling. Indeed, as I report, their individual experiences largely bore this out: Those who managed to get a job, or a better job, during the year of data collection secured that opportunity through family or friends and often through contacts and friendships that they made at school. In other words, the limited economic mobility that resulted from students' involvement in literacy classes came through the extension of social networks, not through the acquisition of literacy skills or the mastery of other content in the formal curriculum.

In what follows, I first outline the conceptual framework. I introduce the concept of human capital, show its relation to literacy, and demonstrate how widespread the conviction of a link between rising literacy and improved economic opportunity has become; I then review studies critiquing the broad, causal claims of such a link. I explain how human capital approaches to literacy and development constitute a flawed, autonomous model of literacy, and I introduce the ideological model of literacy that shaped the research I conducted. In the following section, I present the methods used to collect the data presented here, and I provide some context for an examination of literacy and development in Brazil. Subsequently, I present the data in two parts. The first half describes in depth the cultural meanings that students ascribed to education. Specifically, students explained that "being educated" entails mastery of situationally appropriate means of interacting with peers and social superiors that I here describe as "sociability" and "manners." Students valued formal schooling as one of the sites in which to become "educated." The second half of the data section presents specific information on the economic change experienced by the literacy students during the study period. It shows that students who experienced economic mobility did so not through the suspected mechanism of human capital, but instead through the social networks that students cultivated

in and beyond school by developing what they called an "educated" persona. In conclusion, I reflect on how widespread such cultural definitions of education are, and I argue that the findings presented here suggest a need to reconsider key theories about education and economic mobility, most notably human capital theory, in light of the sociocultural, interactional model of education being proposed in this issue.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

LITERACY AS HUMAN CAPITAL

In the field of educational research, conventional wisdom holds that primary-level schooling, specifically literacy acquisition, promotes economic mobility for individuals and economic development for the nation. This belief is rooted in human capital theory, the causal argument claiming that state investment in schooling or training increases worker productivity and therefore workers' incomes, owners' profits, and (ultimately) national development through economic growth (Becker, 1964; Schultz, 1961, 1981). Human capital theorists have offered empirical evidence suggesting that increased levels of schooling provide economic benefits (see, e.g., Psacharopoulous & Woodhall, 1985). For example, the World Bank's 1991 World Development Report reviewed diverse studies and found a relationship between number of years of primary schooling and economic productivity. Many scholars have attempted to apply human capital theory specifically to literacy. For example, Anderson and Bowman (1965) claimed that a 40% national adult literacy rate formed a necessary threshold for economic development. Wagner and Venezky (1999) reported that, according to the 1993 National Adult Literacy Survey in the United States, "the income of American adults was substantially higher for each level of literacy attained," and they concluded that "literacy and education are closely related to a nation's economic development" (p. 21). As definitions of literacy have expanded beyond the strict (and misinformed) absolute sense of "il/literate" to a recognition that literacy is more like a continuum than a light switch, and as literacy has come to be used as a euphemism for educational levels, other studies have appeared correlating literacy with individual and national development (see, e.g., Berryman, 1994). Such claims have prompted repeated calls for investment in adult literacy programs.

The idea that literacy instruction yields economic development, as well as other forms of development, continues to appear in global educational policy documents (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 1995; United Nations Children's Fund

[UNICEF], 1990; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 1985, 2006). The belief that literacy is essential for various forms of development spurred education development experts to add the goal of achieving a 50% improvement in levels of adult literacy by 2015 to the Education for All agreement adopted in 2000 by 164 nations in Dakar, Senegal. In declaring 2003–2012 the Literacy Decade, the United Nations claimed that literacy is "essential for achieving the goals of eradicating poverty, reducing child mortality, curbing population growth, achieving gender equality and ensuring sustainable development, peace, and democracy" (United Nations, 2002, as quoted in UNESCO, 2006). Nor are these claims limited to developing countries; northern and western countries maintain a similar rhetoric in their documents. For example, the landmark 1995 OECD report titled *Literacy, Economy, and Society* begins,

> In recent years, adult literacy has come to be seen as crucial to the economic performance of industrialized nations…Today, adults need a higher level of literacy to function well: society has become more complex and low-skill jobs are disappearing. Therefore, inadequate levels of literacy among a broad section of the population potentially threaten the strength of economies and the social cohesion of nations (p. 13).

Such narratives of crisis (and, often, decline) linking literacy to economic performance dominate discussions of literacy (e.g., Gowen, 1992; Hull, 1997; Quigley, 1997; Schultz, 1997).

Despite their overwhelming popularity, these claims have been challenged by research that has seriously questioned the causality and universality of such claims. Blaug (1985) critiqued the tendency among many scholars to confuse correlation and causation; he argued that increasing literacy rates had little direct effect on economic growth. Likewise, the historian Harvey Graff (1987) condemned the continuing popularity of "the literacy myth," in which a wide variety of social, political, and economic goods are attributed to literacy. In his analyses of 19th-century literacy in the United States, Canada, and England, he found that the contribution of literacy to economic prosperity was "sometimes limited and often contradictory" (p. 356; see also Graff, 1979). After rigorous analyses, others have found that instances in which literacy contributed to economic development are much more limited and context specific than human capital theory suggests. For example, Fuller, Edwards, and Gorman (1999) found strong evidence that, during the first half of the 20th century, rising literacy rates positively influenced economic output

in urban centers in Mexico, especially in the manufacturing sectors; however, they found that even marked rises in literacy did little to improve economic development in the rural areas.

One problem with research claiming economic consequences for literacy is that it tends to treat schooling as a black box: Because the studies rely on large, aggregate data sets, they do not consider the school-level processes by which outcomes are purportedly produced. Ethnographic research provides the ideal methodological remedy to this shortcoming. As I describe next, ethnographers tend to take a markedly different, more skeptical approach to the topic of literacy and development.

AUTONOMOUS AND IDEOLOGICAL MODELS OF LITERACY

From an ethnographic perspective, human capital theory constitutes what anthropologist Brian Street called an autonomous model of literacy. The autonomous model of literacy treats literacy "as independent of social context, an autonomous variable whose consequences for society and cognition can be derived from its intrinsic character" (Street, 1993, p. 5). The autonomous model tends to conceptualize literacy as a transparent skill learned gradually as the individual moves through universal stages of cognitive and physical development. This skill, the model holds, results in individual rational thought, intellectual development, social development, and economic mobility. The model also assumes a homology between the individual and the society; it predicts that literacy at the individual level will result in economic, social, and political development at the national level. As Street (1999) wrote, the autonomous model:

> assumes a single direction in which literacy development can be traced, and associates it with "progress," "civilization," individual liberty, and social mobility. It isolates literacy as an independent variable and then claims to be able to study its consequences. These consequences are classically represented in terms of economic "take-off" or in terms of cognitive skills (p. 56).

As Street rightly indicated, proponents of an autonomous model tend to understand literacy in fairly narrow terms, ignoring the incredible diversity of literacy practices; they privilege certain kinds of literacy and certain ways of using literacy, ignoring the arbitrary nature by which certain practices are elevated as superior to others. An autonomous model of literacy prevails in current literacy policy and popular discourse, such as the global educational policy documents quoted above.

In contrast, anthropologists and other sociocultural scholars generally

subscribe to ideological models of literacy. Advocates of this position "view literacy practices as inextricably linked to cultural and power structures in society, and recognize the variety of cultural practices associated with reading and writing in different contexts" (Street, 1993, p.7). An ideological model

> forces one to be more wary of grand generalizations and cherished assumptions about literacy "in itself." Those who subscribe to this second model concentrate on the specific social practices of reading and writing. They recognize the ideological and therefore culturally embedded nature of such practices. The model stresses the significance of the socialization process in the construction of the meaning of literacy for informants, and is therefore concerned with the general social institutions through which this process takes place and not just the specific "educational" ones (Street, 1999, p. 56).

This "social turn" in literacy studies resulted from a steady stream of influential research produced over the past 30 years.[2] In her study of literacy in three communities, Heath (1983) revealed how literacy events were shaped by important factors such as micro-level parental and religious authority structures and social interaction routines. In their study of the Vai in Liberia, Scribner and Cole (1981) debunked autonomous claims about cognitive "consequences" of literacy by comparing performance on psychological tasks in three scripts, only two of which were learned in schools. Other scholars have since shown how contexts such as schools, religious organizations, and families radically alter what counts as literacy and how it is practiced (e.g., Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Barton, Hamilton, & Ivanic, 2000; Hull & Schultz, 2001). Gee (1996) emphasized the serious sociocultural negotiation of identity and self that all people do when they engage particular literacy practices (see also Bartlett, in press). Scholars have questioned the unity of literacy itself, emphasizing the multiplicity of literacies, which vary by language, script, domain, role, network, participants, context, and other factors (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; New London Group, 1996). From this analytical perspective, literacy cannot and should not be defined a priori, as it is by most conventional measures of literacy; instead, what counts as literacy is itself the result of ongoing, complex sociocultural negotiations. Finally, the realization that literacy practices shape and are shaped by larger power structures owes much to Paulo Freire's insistence that, although both the absence and presence of literacy have generally served to oppress the poor, reading and writing "the word and the world" might also contribute

to their liberation (1970, 1987). Critical scholars of literacy continue to investigate the connections between literacy and power,[3] for example, by revealing the impact of standardization and testing regimes on linguistic and cultural diversity (McCarty, 2005) or by examining the complex and unanticipated outcomes of Freirean pedagogy (Bartlett, 2005; Shor & Pari, 1999).

In general, then, sociocultural scholars focus more on the types of literacy being employed by people, the meanings with which they are imbued, and the ways in which literacy practices participate in larger power structures. As McCarty (2005) wrote, "the key question is not whether one reads or writes or does not, but rather the social meaning of languages and literacies—their roles in human social life" (p. xix). Such an ideological approach steers anthropologists away from attempts to arrive at causal links and toward careful study of the relentlessly local and complex social and cultural interactions that influence what kind of "outcomes" will result from schooling.

During my ethnographic study of literacy in Brazil, students explained to me that literacy instruction could foster economic opportunity, but not primarily through the formal mechanism of an increase in skills, as propounded by human capital theory and contemporary international educational policies. Instead, as I discuss in detail in the data sections, the students explained to me that *educação,* their word for a mix of book knowledge and social skills gained in part through formal schooling, helped them to establish and maintain the sociable attributes and social networks that furthered access to economic opportunities. In brief, then, they told me that they valued literacy and education not solely or primarily for its provision of human capital, but rather for the opportunity to enhance their "educated" persona and extend their social networks. Indeed, the students in my study held an idea of literacy more closely aligned with Cremin's and Varenne's notion of education as social interaction than with the causal arguments of human capital theory.

METHODS AND SETTING

In this article, I draw data from a 24-month ethnographic study of youth and adult literacy in two Brazilian cities: Rio de Janeiro, a southeastern metropolis with somewhere between 8 and 12 million inhabitants, and João Pessoa, a state capital in the northeast with approximately 600,000 residents. In each city, I studied two cases, one public school and one nongovernmental organization; in each of the four cases, I worked with at least 10 focal students, interviewing them and conducting informal

participant observation with them at school, work, home, church, and during free social hours. (In one site, the sample included 11 focal students.) I came to know these 41 focal students very well. In general, they seemed to enjoy the novelty of an English-speaking, wealthier foreign friend, and they would often ask me to teach them English vocabulary or interpret American political and cultural events. My willingness to "hang out" and listen seemed to fit well with the laid-back, sociable, friendly manner that most of them cultivated and valued. We often held spontaneous, intimate conversations about family, studies, religion, and other topics, which brought us even closer together. Even after completing the research segment at each site, I maintained contact with each focal student through letters, phone calls, and visits for at least 1 year, and with some for a much longer period.

The specific data set for this article consists of formal interviews with, and informal observations of, the 41 focal youth and adults. All interviews and observations were conducted solely in Portuguese, a language in which I am proficient thanks to several years of language study, 2 years of immersion, and the patience of my interlocutors during my first few months in Rio de Janeiro. Interviews generally lasted 1.5–2 hours, though some extended to as long as 4 hours. They were generally conducted during class time (classes were held between 7 p.m. and 10 p.m., depending on the school's schedule) in an empty classroom. Each interview was taped by me and transcribed by a fluent Portuguese speaker. After reviewing the tapes, I regularly asked follow-up questions during informal interactions with students; their responses to these questions are also part of the data for this article.

The literacy environments in Rio de Janeiro and João Pessoa differ in important ways. In general, the southeast is a wealthier region that for decades has afforded not only greater opportunities for the poor to go to school but also better schools for them to attend. As a result, levels of formal schooling are higher in the southeast where, according to conventional measures, a much larger percentage of the population is able to read and write at a basic level.[4] The inability to read and write at a basic level is most prevalent in the rural areas of these regions for several reasons: Until fairly recently, many rural areas lacked basic educational infrastructure, and even today, many families in rural areas lack the economic status and stability that they would need to spare the labor of their children during school hours. Many of those living in cities like Rio de Janeiro and João Pessoa who cannot read or write at a basic level have migrated there from the countryside.[5]

THE MULTIPLE MEANINGS OF EDUCATION IN BRAZIL

In Brazil, as in much of Latin America, the word *educação* has strong connotations that compellingly shape perceptions of schooling. *Educação* signifies book knowledge and sociability, manners, or comportment. Book knowledge straightforwardly references the kind of content learned through formal schooling. To "be educated" can mean simply to have completed a basic level of formal schooling. However, it can also signify a person who knows how to act in situationally appropriate ways. This latter connotation of education centrally features social interaction, specifically linguistic interaction. According to the 41 students I worked with in Brazil, two forms of communicative competence are necessary to be "educated": sociability, or routines for interactions among relative social peers, and manners, routines for interactions between social groups with differential power.

Sociability: Learning to communicate and express oneself

Many of the people I worked with explained to me that education entailed sociability. *Sociability* is my word for the informal, affable ways of talking and acting deemed appropriate among social peers or intimates. Students highly praised in others the ability and willingness to connect socially and to spread good cheer. Sociability fostered warm, supportive social relations among social peers or near-peers.

The students I worked with most commonly mentioned the importance of learning to *communicar-se*. Though the verb might translate most smoothly as "communicate," it is important that the form is reflexive and literally means to "communicate oneself." To "*communicar-se*" involves learning to express oneself, empathize, and connect with peers. It entails a specific form of emotional labor, in which one positions oneself as warm, open, inviting, and caring (Bartlett, 2001). Though communicating includes all forms of body language and posture, it relies extensively on linguistic articulacy.

Students used another, similar phrase to describe evidence of the educated person: *explicar-se*. *Explicar-se* can mean to explain, to interpret, to elucidate, or to make clear; it can also mean to pronounce clearly. Like *communicar-se,* it is a reflexive verb. Hence, the word indexes formal knowledge (in order to explain things), "pretty" speech and clear pronunciation, and the interpersonal ability to relate oneself to one's audience.

Notably, students related learning to *explicar-se* and *comunicar-se* directly with formal schooling and literacy. Below I quote some of the ways that

students defined *educação* using the phrases *communicar-se* and *explicar-se*:

Maria José, a 24-year-old mother of one child and employed as a housecleaner:

> MJ: [To be educated] is to know how to express yourself, how to speak properly, correctly.
>
> LB: Where does it come from?
>
> MJ: You learn to be educated at home, but you also learn it from school, from reading. . .

Beatriz, a 55-year-old mother of three grown children who, at that time, took care of her grandchildren during the day:

> LB: What is education?
>
> B: Education is having studied, knowing how to read and write. Education is also knowing how to communicate oneself, how to deal with other people.

Da Luz, a 28-year-old who worked at home caring for her three children:

> LB: Why do you choose to go to school?
>
> DL:For me it has been good to study, to learn more. I communicate myself, I have learned to communicate better. My husband doesn't like it, because now I talk to more people in the neighborhood.

Eva, a 31-year-old woman with a fourth-grade education who, at the time of our interview, was studying literacy at night and working as a prostitute:

> LB: Why is it important to study?
>
> E: Because by studying one learns.
>
> LB: Learns what?

E: To read, to write, to respect others, to see people differently, with other eyes, and not with ignorance. Because there are some people who are too ignorant. You have to know how to treat your friends better, with other words. You become educated.

LB: What does education mean?

E: With *educação*, you aren't illiterate. Morally, you pursue friendship. If you are an unkind person, you won't make friends. If you are a smiling person, like you are, who knows how to treat people with affection, [you'll have] that harmony, that transformative friendship.

L: And why is it so important to be a smiling person?

E: To be happy.

Rosa, a 39-year-old woman working at the public school as a janitor:

R: When I came to work here [at the school as a janitor], no one believed that I didn't know how to read, they said I was a liar, because I knew how to explain things (*explicar-me*), I knew how to converse. I said, "Folks, do I have to condemn myself?" The truth is that I don't know how to read, and no one there believed me.

L: What does knowing how to explain things have to do with knowing how to read?

R: Because sometimes one doesn't know how to read but is a well-informed person, knows how to explain things, how to converse. Sometimes one knows how to read but is a total imbecile, aren't there people like that? Knows how to read but is a stupid person. . . . People who know how to read, a teacher for example, but doesn't have a way of being [i.e., of getting along], distances herself from others, creates inequality because she thinks herself [better]. Like, I'm a janitor, so-and-so isn't, and that difference remains. It's terrible! So when people say that one doesn't read but knows how to explain oneself, it's in this sense.

Geraldo, a 29-year-old who held construction and factory jobs for 10 years before becoming seriously disabled in a workplace accident:

> G: The person who has studied more has more capacity to learn to speak, to learn to respect [others] even more than that person who didn't study, who doesn't have knowledge of anything.

Joana, a 42-year-old woman with two children and working as a housecleaner:

> J: I learned to speak well by listening to the boss in the houses I cleaned when I moved to the city. Now speak so differently that someone once told me, "You're illiterate but you don't seem like it. You explain things well and give advice."
>
> LB: How did that make you feel?
>
> J: Shocked, and happy, because it meant that I speak well.

The students I interviewed told me that they greatly valued sociability, or knowing how to get along with others and how to present a friendly persona, and they explained that they believed that these skills were most pronounced in "educated" persons. They associated this form of education with being more outgoing, developing friendships and relationships, and in general with greater tranquility and happiness. Most important, they closely linked the development of an educated persona with schooling and literacy. As Maria José said, "You learn to be educated at home, but you also learn it from school, from reading." According to the students, the state of "being literate" signaled a broad range of skills, including knowing how to read and write, but also knowing how to "speak well" and get along with others.

MANNERS: "KNOWING HOW TO ENTER AND HOW TO LEAVE?"

Educação had another, equally important connotation among the students I interviewed: It signified what I call *manners*, or socially appropriate behavior in the company of status superiors. Manners prescribe one's attitudes and actions toward people of marked social superiority or people with whom one has no or little established familiarity. To be educated in this sense is to accept and assume one's place in a social hierarchy. Parents regularly told their children to "be educated," by which they meant to act appropriately. In this sense, *educação* concerns visible manifestations or performances of the self that are available for scrutiny, such as forms of address and conversation, manners of eating, and ways of occupying space. This connotation of education is closely tied to the stu-

dents' explanations of sociability, but it emphasizes hierarchy to a greater extent. Below, I quote some instances in which people explained this meaning of education to me.

Dalva, a 34-year-old mother of two who worked for a cleaning service:

> D: Education is knowing how to converse with people, how to enter a place in the right way, how to eat right, all of this comes from education.

Zé, a 22-year-old man who worked as a waiter:

> Z: Education is knowing how to respect others and respect yourself.

Jacemar, a 34-year-old construction worker:

> J: Being educated means knowing how to act in different public places. If I try to speak fancy with my friends, they will make fun of me. But if I go to a doctor's office, I have to dress differently and speak differently, with more education.

Eunisa, a 46-year-old woman who had worked as a maid but at the time of our interview was unemployed because of mental illness:

> E: Education is knowing how to enter and how to leave.
>
> LB: What does that mean?
>
> E: It means not to mess with the things of others. . . . To respect the rules. If you go to work in someone's house, you respect the bosses. Don't mess with their things. My mother taught me this. Leave things where you found them. . . . If you go in a church, you have to respect the rules of the church. If you go in the supermarket, any place, the school, you have to respect your teacher, the principal. Seek to arrive on time . . . . respect school rules. . . . It's important to study, study is good, but education is more [important]. Education is knowing how to enter and how to leave a place, how to treat people well, respect your elders, like my mom taught [us] since we were little. When you go to bed, give blessings to your elders. Even to this day I do that . . . I think *educação* is very important.

LB: Why is it important to you?

E: To this day thanks be to God I know how to enter and how to leave. I worked [as a maid] in the house of a *doutora* [a highly educated woman], and everyone there likes me very much. When she would go out, she'd leave me taking care of everything, with full responsibility for the house.

LB: Is it important for everyone to like a person?

E: Definitely.

LB: Why?

E: Because one feels loved. I, thanks be to God, I feel very privileged, glory be to Jesus for this, because everyone likes me here in the neighborhood where I live, I don't have any enemies.

The people I interviewed told me that *educação* is desirable for various reasons. Presenting oneself as educated provided an important avenue to respect. Manners gave people grounds to demand respect. Through showing regard for others, people made a claim to an expectation of respect in return. Manners facilitated smooth vertical social relations and reduced the chances of a disagreement, which is especially desirable among those seeking to avoid conflict with more socially powerful people. Manners provided a repertoire of routines that show students how to build the social networks that were critical in the Brazilian clientelist system.

Though I met people of all social classes who talked of the importance of education, it seemed to be a particular concern among the poor. Poor people used *educação* to express themselves as moral, trustworthy, and good. Many people talked at length about the pleasures of being respected and liked. However, the emphasis on "being educated" was about more than just being liked or respected; social networks established in part through the development of an educated persona provided critical information and influence in the search for (better) jobs, as I demonstrate in the next section.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

As the students were keenly aware, economic and other opportunities often came through social networks with social superiors and/or peers

that were established and maintained through the cultivation of an educated persona. Several students joked that IQ (or *QI* in Portuguese) stands not for intelligence quotient (*quociente de inteligência*) but for "who is interested" (*quem interessa*). Knowledge (*conhecimento*), they said, is not only what you know, but who you know. Valuable contacts, they said, fell into two basic categories: peers, generally friends or family, and more powerful acquaintances. Friends provided important information, assistance, and support. Patrons provided important social bridges to economic resources. Having someone "on the inside" assured a person an edge in a tight labor market. Common names for this phenomenon included "big shark" (*tubarão*), "fish stew" *(peixada)*, and "godfather" or "godmother" *(padrinho ou madrinha)*.

According to my data (see the appendix), schooling did help some people secure greater economic opportunity, but not in the ways that human capital theory predicts it might. At least in the short period of 1 year of literacy classes, students did not improve their economic situations as a result of their increased proficiency in reading and writing. Instead, schooling helped some students to expand their social networks in ways that benefited them economically. They did this both through the physical setting of schooling (i.e., through the contacts they made there) and, more abstractly, through the kinds of sociability and manners that they felt they gained in the classes. Specifically, of the 41 students I interviewed, 15 experienced a job change during the year of our acquaintance; of those 15, 7 got jobs or work through school-related contacts (see the appendix).

There are several important things worth noting about this data. First, for the vast majority of the students, improving their reading and writing abilities did not result in economic mobility; there was no "autonomous" literacy effect. Indeed, many of them were not seeking such a change. Nine of the women were at home caring for children and did not seek to change their employment status. Of the 8 unemployed students, only 1 was actively seeking work; 2 were disabled, 1 was retired, and 4 were not looking for jobs. That left 24 people who might be categorized as actively looking for economic opportunities.

Second, for this group of students, social networks were the key ingredient for economic mobility. Each of the 15 people who changed jobs during the year reported that this opportunity came through a personal contact (though not necessarily a contact made at school). For example, Zé got a job as a waiter through a friend's contacts; the previously unemployed Carmen got a job cleaning a church through one of the priests she knew; and Marina left her less remunerative job in a preschool when

her husband, a doorman, got her a shift as a doorwoman in the same building.

Third, schooling contributed to the expansion of social networks. This seemed to be particularly important for women, who reported that their opportunities to develop relationships with people were severely limited.[6] Of the 15 students who got or changed jobs during the school year, 7 reported that they learned of the job through a school-related contact. A classmate of Marco's got him a job preparing meals at the hospital; Maria José found a new house to clean through a friend she made at school; Maria Lúcia sold Avon to interested classmates; Josete got some babysitting jobs through a friend at school; Teresa found a new house to clean through a teacher at school; Rosa got a job as the school janitor after she started studying at school; and Da Luz got temporary work through a school-related contact.

Fourth, for the 15 students who got or changed jobs, their economic mobility was due not to their literacy skills but to personal contacts. Only 2 people reported that their new jobs required reading or writing in some capacity. The first, Zé, got a job as a waiter; he reported that he learned a shorthand writing system to record customers' requests. The second, Maria Lúcia, started selling Avon; she had to learn to record her customers' names and product requests on the order form provided by the company. Maria Lúcia had considerable difficulty with this form. She told me that in the beginning, she would memorize each customer's request and then had to ask her husband to help her fill out the form, which did not initially make sense to her. None of the other 15 students who got or changed jobs reported that they used their improved literacy skills on the job.

Fifth, several of the students told me that they felt that being enrolled in literacy classes contributed to their educated persona and thus to their social networks. In other words, schooling contributed to their education not only by providing a site to meet other people but also by encouraging them to be "more educated." For example, Roseli stated that by being in school, she had learned to "open up," which allowed her to make more friends. Josete reported that before coming to literacy classes, she was a "quiet thing" who kept to herself; she felt that she had learned to become more social since enrolling in school. Rosa explained that she got her job as a janitor at the public school through friendship and maintained it thanks to her social skills:

> Some people find it hard to believe that I work for the state because I can't read. What is it [that the state] wants these days?

> It's a public *concurso* [examination], which I didn't do. . . . I never took the examination to get my job. I got it through friendship. Because I know how to act, I know how to win over people, how to express myself, I'm still in my job today. See, I never took the exam . . . [the director gave me the job] because he thinks I'm worth it.

The principal was so supportive of Rosa, in fact, that he let her study at night while she was "on the clock." Rosa felt it was important to study in order to expand her written and spoken literacy skills and become more "elevated."

For the 41 students I interviewed, schooling, specifically literacy instruction, did not produce an autonomous economic effect, nor did it result in human capital that translated into economic mobility. Instead, literacy instruction provided important social contacts that benefited some students economically. Further, the students told me that they believed that schooling in general helped them to develop their communicative competence in ways that ultimately helped them to build or maintain critical social networks. Only by examining the meanings of education, specifically the centrality of speech and sociability to the educated persona, can we understand the potential of education (broadly conceived) for economic mobility.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

As I have shown in the previous sections, Brazilian literacy students reported culturally specific connotations of *educação.* To date, we do not have sufficient ethnographic literature to know precisely how widespread are the connotations of education as sociability and manners. It is worth noting that several ethnographic studies reported similar connotations among different Latin and Latino/Latina populations. In her study of Mexican mothers who had recently immigrated to North Carolina, Villenas (2001) reported that the women defined *educación* as "having the social skills of etiquette, loyalty to family and kin, and most import, respect" (p. 13). These women felt that their children received a solid moral education in their homes, an education that was being challenged in the American school system. Likewise, Valdés (1996) and Valenzuela (1999), working with Mexican immigrants in diverse parts of the United States, discussed similar cultural connotations of *educación,* which Valenzuela succinctly defined as "respect, responsibility, and sociality" (p. 21). Reese, Balzano, Gallimore, and Goldenberg (1995) showed that a wide variety of Latinos share a cultural definition of *educación* that stresses

respect, moral development, social skills, and correct behavior. These studies suggest that the connotations of sociability and manners might pertain to education in other parts of the Americas. Thus, although the specific cultural connotations of education reported here are not meant to be generalizable, there is reason to believe that they might pertain elsewhere.

However, the central thesis of this article is that the effects of literacy programs on students' lives are continually mediated by social and cultural factors that are only perceptible and understandable in the local context. In this particular study, my observations revealed a close link between the ways in which the impoverished youth and adult literacy students who participated in this study talked about literacy and the ways in which they used schooling to pursue economic opportunities. The students said that sociability, manners, and social networks, rather than their emergent abilities to read and write, provided them access to jobs. Their reports suggest that educational researchers should reconsider theories about schooling and economic mobility by attending to the cultural processes through which schooling and literacy sometimes result in economic benefits. The impact of literacy programs on these students was filtered through their specific definitions of education. Though the relevant social and cultural factors will undoubtedly vary in other contexts, they are sure to be significant enough to influence what counts as literacy, what students expect from literacy classes, and how students make use of the schooling provided.

More generally, this study illustrates the value of reconceptualizing education as *interaction*, as recommended in this special issue. Looking at schooling as a set of social practices enables us to make visible the processes through which schooling results in diverse outcomes. This approach to education reveals the ways in which power relations, social interactions, and cultural meanings influence the outcomes of schooling.

Acknowledgment

I would like to thank Hervé Varenne, Fran Vavrus, and Teresa McCarty for their insightful comments on this article.

Notes

1 All names are pseudonyms.

2 This review of the literature in sociocultural studies of literacy is necessarily abbreviated. See Street (1984) for a full review of the key studies that informed his distinction between autonomous and ideological models of literacy; see Collins and Blot 2003 and Collins 1995 for a helpful overview of the broader field.

3 For an excellent overview of critical literacy, see Lankshear and McLaren (1993).

4 Because they reify "literacy" as a particular and very narrow set of skills rather than the fluid and locally negotiated literacy practices that sociocultural studies have revealed actual literacy to be, literacy rates are a highly flawed measure that reinforce autonomous models of literacy. However, they do provide a comparative sense of the distribution of that narrow set of skills. At the time of this research, the literacy rate for the population aged 15 and older over in the southeast was 91.3% as compared with 71.3% in the northeast (Source: 1997 IBGE [Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics] census materials; PNAD, 1997). Literacy rates in both regions increased slightly by 2004, to 93.4% and 77.6%, respectively (PNAD, 2004). See http://tabnet.datasus.gov.br/cgi/idb1998/fqb01.htm and http://www.ibge.gov.br/home/estatistica/populacao/trabalhoerendimento/pnad2004/sintese/tab31.pdf.

5 In 2000, Rio de Janeiro and João Pessoa reported literacy rates of 93% and 88%. See http://www.ibge.gov.br/english/estatistica/populacao/censo2000/

6 See also Stromquist (1997), whose study of literacy classes for women in southeastern Brazil discovered that women highly valued the classes for the opportunities that they provided to network with other women and to improve their confidence to speak.

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APPENDIX

List of Students Who Participated in the Study

School	Name	Age	Gender/ No. children	Occupation	Occupational change?
Rio public	Bruno	20	M/1	Waiter in, hair salon	No
Rio public	Barbara	18	F/2	Housewife	No
Rio public	Cristina	18	F/0	Housewife	No
Rio public	Marco	22	M/0	Key cutter	Yes; hospital asst. cook, through school contact
Rio public	Eulalia	17	F/0	Unemployed	No
Rio public	Maria Jose	24	F/1	House-cleaner	Yes, new house to clean through friend at school
Rio public	Maria Lúcia	27	F/3	Avon/church cleaner	Yes, sold at school
Rio public	Reginaldo	23	M/0	Unemployed	No
Rio public	Zé	22	M/0	Waiter	No
Rio public	Zé	36	M/3	Waiter	Yes, got waiter job through friend (not at school)
Rio NGO	Carmen	44	F/4	Cleaned a church	Yes, got job through priest friend
Rio NGO	Dejane	21	F/2	Housewife	No
Rio NGO	Josete	39	F/0	House-cleaner	Yes, kept house cleaning job, but got babysitting jobs through a friend at school

Rio NGO	Marina	42	F/3	Child care	Yes; got job as doorwoman through husband
Rio NGO	Rejane	21	F/0	Housewife	No
Rio NGO	Roseli	29	F/0	House-cleaner	Yes, got new house to clean through church contact
Rio NGO	Graça	47	F/0	House-cleaner	No
Rio NGO	Ana	24	F/0	House-cleaner	No
Rio NGO	Teresa	35	F/0	House-cleaner	Yes, new house to clean through teacher at school
Rio NGO	Joana	42	F/2	House-cleaner	No
JP public	Rosa 3.10.99	39	F/2	School janitor	Yes, got job as janitor after starting to study there
JP public	Eunisa 3.7.99	46	f/0	Unemployed	No, mental illness prevented work
JP public	Ana 4.11.99	19	f/0	Unemployed	No
JP public	Ana Paula 4.11.99	21	f/0	Unemployed	No
JP public	Bia 28.10.99	43	f/4	Housewife	No
JP public	Josefa 21.10.99	29	f/3	Housewife	No
JP public	Dalva 6.7.99	34	f/2	Worked for a cleaning service	Yes, got job through brother
JP public	Jaciára 11.7.99	36	m/2	Factory	No
JP public	Jacemar 19.10.99	34	M/2	Construction	Yes, through friend (not at school)
JP public	Carlos 3.11.99	21	m/0	Unemployed	No
JP NGO	Geraldo 29.7.99	29	m/2	Unemployed	No, disabled on the job
JP NGO	Zezinho 10.7.99	53	m/3	Self-employed (store in front of home)	No
JP NGO	Gilson 20.7.99	33	m/4	Irregularly employed (*biscate*)	Yes, got odd jobs through PT contacts at acampamento

JP NGO	Miguel 7.10.99	65	m/4	Retired (agriculture)	No
JP NGO	Maria José 11.7.99	37	f/2	Housewife	No
JP NGO	Beatriz 11.7.99	55	f/3	Took care of grandchildren	No
JP NGO	Peo 20.7.99	32	f/4	Housewife	No
JP NGO	Da Luz 22.10.99	28	f/3	Housewife	Yes, got temp. work through school contact
JP NGO	Eva 22.7.99	31	f/2	Prostitute	No
JP NGO	Graça 26.7.99	32	f/1	House-cleaner	Yes, got house to clean through neighborhood contact
JP NGO	Telma 16.7.99	29	f/1	Housewife	No

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