Engaging the Sociological Imagination: My Journey into Design Research and Public Sociology

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I chronicle the changes in my research, especially those that have moved me closer to C. Wright Mills's call for a "sociological imagination" and Dell Hymes's reinvented anthropology. As I spend more time attempting to create and describe equitable educational environments and less time documenting educational inequality, I have adopted a version of "design research." I describe the possibilities and limitations of trying to conduct research while participating in the phenomenon under investigation. [sociological imagination, critical ethnography, public sociology, design research]

> The sociological imagination enables its possessor to understand the larger historical scene in terms of its meaning for the inner life and the external career of a variety of individuals. It enables him to take into account how individuals, in the welter of their daily experience, often become falsely conscious of their social positions. Within that welter, the framework of modern society is sought, and within that framework the psychologies of a variety of men and women are formulated. By such means the personal uneasiness of individuals is focused upon explicit troubles and the indifference of publics is transformed into involvement with public issues. (C. Wright Mills 1959:5)

C. Wright Mills (1959) enjoined social scientists of my generation to shun "abstracted empiricism" and "grand theory" to make our research relevant for social justice. In the current historical context, Mills's call for politically engaged research has been reframed as "public sociology" (Buroway 2005; Buroway et al. 2004). Dell Hymes (1972) and Peggy Sanday (1976) encouraged anthropologists to adopt a similar progressive role. Adding their voices to that conversation, Bradley Levinson et al. (1995), Levinson and Margaret Sutton (2001), and Douglas Foley and Angela Valenzuela (2006) invoke critical ethnography and Luke Lassiter (2005) and Les Field and Richard Fox (2007) promote collaborative ethnography.

Although I have been influenced by Mills since early in my career, it has not been until recently that I have engaged Mills's dictum more fully and conscientiously in my work. In this article I first chronicle the changes in my research, especially those that have moved me closer to Mills's vision for sociology and Hymes's reinvented anthropology. As I spend more time attempting to create and describe equitable educational environments and less time documenting educational inequality, I have adopted a version of "design" or "collaborative" research. After I describe the distinctive features of that approach, I describe the possibilities and limitations of trying to conduct research while participating in the phenomenon under investigation.

This article is written in response to the offer by Foley and Valenzuela (2006), who encourage ethnographers to explore and publish about our collaborative methodological and political practices. A problem plaguing retrospective reflections is the

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urge to make one's career moves seem more rational than they actually were at the time. I try here not to rewrite biography and history to serve that purpose.

From Describing Educational Inequality to Attempting to Create Educational Equality

My early empirical studies were, for the most part, concerned with the social construction of educational inequality by school sorting practices, including educational testing (Mehan 1973, 1978:59–65; Mehan and Wood 1975:37–46), tracking (Cicourel and Mehan 1985), and special education placements (Mehan et al. 1986). My work—and that of colleagues who influenced me considerably (notably Courtney Cazden, Aaron Cicourel, Michael Cole, Fred Erickson, Susan Florio, Peg Griffin, and Ray McDermott)—documented how low-income students of color were treated differently than their middle-income white contemporaries in face-to-face interactions with teachers, testers, and counselors. At the same time, I directed the University of California, San Diego's (UCSD) teacher education program, which infused information about cultural differences in language use and the deleterious effects of school sorting practices into theory and methods courses.

Increasingly disillusioned with the separation of my policy and research work and my inability to convince people that inequality was produced in moment-to-moment interaction, I turned my attention to documenting attempts by educators to construct social equality. This switch took tangible shape with my study of the Achievement Via Individual Determination (AVID) program, an untracking program that sought to prepare underrepresented minority students for college by placing them in college preparatory classes, accompanied by a system of academic and social supports (Mehan et al. 1996).

Building an Educational Field Station

My formulation of the theory of action undergirding AVID contributed to the rationale for building a 6–12 school on the UCSD campus for the education of low-income students. The construction of the Preuss School emerged in a very specific historical and political context. The Regents of the University of California eliminated the use of race and gender as factors in University admissions in 1995. A small, albeit fervent, group of UCSD faculty, community members, and students led by Thurgood Marshall College Provost Cecil Lytle proposed that UCSD open a college-preparatory school on campus for low-income students so that they would be well prepared to "walk in the front door" of any University of California (UC) campus or other respectable college.

This initial proposal was rejected, first by the Academic Senate, and then by UCSD's new chancellor after a contentious public debate, in which not only the concept of the charter school but also tacit definitions of *community, equality,* and the *university* itself became the object of contest and struggle. Fueled by a public outcry, editorials decrying the university as elitist, and pressure from the UC Regents to embrace a bold initiative to address the lack of diversity on UC campuses, a more comprehensive plan was later approved by the chancellor and the faculty (Rosen and Mehan 2003). The more comprehensive plan created the Center for Research on Educational Equity, Access, and Teaching Excellence (CREATE) to monitor the progress of the on-campus

school, conduct research on educational equity, and use the Preuss School as a model for schools in local school districts to improve the education of underserved minority youth. I became director of CREATE in 1999.

We conceive of CREATE as an "educational field station" (Mehan and Lytle 2006). Educational field stations, first proposed by the University of California Black Eligibility Task Force (Duster et al. 1990), are analogous to UC agricultural field stations. UC agricultural field stations developed and disseminated research that has made agriculture one of the major industries in California. Based on that logic, other UC research programs, including those in space and ocean exploration, structural engineering, health care, and computer technology, have been developed that contribute to economic development and the public good under the aegis of the university's broader public mission. CREATE seeks to extend that logic to educational equity issues by encouraging the University to face the challenges emerging from the recent cultural and demographic shifts in our society, just as it faced previous economic and industrial shifts.

The question facing us now is: How do we forge a civil society in the face of ethnic, cultural, and socioeconomic diversity? That is a question for public debate to be sure; but, more importantly, we at UCSD think that diversity is a research and policy question that our university, because it is a public university, has the obligation to confront seriously. This is the role we envision for CREATE (Mehan and Lytle 2006). CREATE researchers provide a wide range of technical, cultural, and structural resources to schools with high proportions of underrepresented minority students (Jones et al. 2002; Yonezawa et al. 2001), conduct basic and design research at the Preuss School and other public schools, and make the lessons we learn about how to build a college-going culture available to researchers, educators, and policy makers in the educational field.

The Preuss School, a single-track, college-preparatory public charter school on the UCSD campus, is at the center of CREATE's educational field station model. The express purpose of the school is to prepare students from low-income backgrounds for college and to serve as a model for public school improvement. The faculty and staff select through a lottery low-income sixth grade students with high potential but underdeveloped skills. In the 2004–05 school year, 59.5 percent of the student population was Latino, 12.8 percent African American, 21.7 percent Asian, and 6 percent white and "other" (McClure et al. 2006).

We derived the principles of the Preuss School from current thinking about cognition and the social organization of schooling. Research on detracking and cognitive development suggests all normally functioning humans have the capacity to complete a rigorous course of study in high school that prepares them for college and the world of work if that course of study is accompanied by a system of social and academic supports (Bruner 1986; Cicourel and Mehan 1983; Laboratory of Comparative Human Cognition 1983; Mehan et al. 1996; Meier 1995). Following the logic of that research, the Preuss School only offers college-preparatory classes. The school's curriculum fulfills or exceeds the University of California and California State University entry requirements.

Recognizing that the students who enroll at Preuss are differentially prepared, the educators at the school have instituted a variety of academic and social supports or "scaffolds" to assist students meet the challenges of the rigorous curriculum required for entering four-year colleges and universities. Most notably, the school extends its

year by 18 days, which gives students more opportunities to meet the academic demands of the school. UCSD students serve as tutors in class and after school. Students still in need of help are "invited" to participate in additional tutoring sessions during "Saturday Academies."

Extending the Model to Neighborhood Schools Mediated by CREATE

By preparing students from underrepresented minority backgrounds for college, the Preuss School is intended to help increase the diversity on UC campuses, which was reduced by the regent's decision to ban affirmative action. The school is also intended to be a model in that the principles developed at the school are available to be adapted by other schools. While "Cal Prep" at UC Berkeley and "The Wildcat School" at Arizona have been influenced by our work, the most notable example of adaptation of the principles developed at Preuss School is occurring at Gompers Charter Middle School (GCMS) in Southeast San Diego, mediated by CREATE.

The original Gompers Secondary School had been an urban 7–12 school in Southeast San Diego for over 50 years in a community with a high crime rate and a lengthy history of gang-related violence. This school, unable to meet its No Child Left Behind (NCLB) performance targets for six consecutive years, was required to restructure. After months of deliberation, a working group of parents, teachers, administrators, and community leaders (notably from the San Diego Chicano Federation and the San Diego Urban League) recommended to the school board of the San Diego Unified School District (SDUSD) that the school be reconstituted as a charter school in partnership with UCSD CREATE.

UCSD's involvement was provoked by aroused parents who pointed out that 70 families living in Southeast San Diego had at least one child attending Gompers and at least one child attending the Preuss School. Those children, they informed the SDUSD in many raucous meetings, were succeeding academically, so why can't there be a similar school in the neighborhood? Why did their children need to ride a bus to La Jolla (one of the wealthiest neighborhoods in the county) for a quality education? Why can't they just walk across the street? Parents' firsthand knowledge of the difference a school could make in the lives of their children helped to create an empowered and informed community.

Despite the vocal support of neighborhood parents, the formation of GCMS, like the formation of the Preuss School, endured a lengthy and contentious political process. The SDUSD school board, over the objections of the superintendent, vocal teachers, and parents, removed the principal of Gompers, a charismatic young Latino who had vehemently supported the conversion of the "old" Gompers to a charter school in partnership with UCSD. Parents, leaders of community groups, my university colleagues, and I all saw this as a naked attempt to decapitate the leadership of a burgeoning movement to gain local control over education in historically underserved neighborhoods. If that was, in fact, the SDUSD board strategy, it failed. Instead of deflating, the movement expanded. An increasing number of community groups, newspapers, and community members rallied to the cause.

Precipitously firing the school's principal was not the only oppositional board action. The board initially defined the proposal as a call for a new, start-up, charter school, then changed its position. It declared that Gompers was a conversion charter, not a start-up charter, which would require the petitioners to secure the approval of

50 percent of the tenured faculty as well as 50 percent of the school's parents. The board gave the petitioners 30 days to secure the necessary signatures. Despite the fact that the conversion of Gompers from a conventional public school to a charter school would eliminate certain teacher union provisions, and did not guarantee any teachers continued employment, 58 percent of the school's full-time, unionized teachers voted for the proposal to establish Gompers as a partner of UCSD. Indeed, the union representative from Gompers spoke eloquently in favor of the charter petition before the school board. After begrudgingly conceding that the petitioners had met all the conditions they had imposed, on March 1, 2005, the San Diego Unified School District Board of Education unanimously approved the petition to establish GCMS as a UCSD partnership school. The school, which opened its doors to students on September 6, 2005, enrolls 841 students (35 percent of which are African American, 10 percent are Asian, 53 percent are Latino, and 2 percent are white) and employs 45 teachers.[1]

Charter schools are controversial and are not the only way to improve public schools. But there are certain circumstances—such as the deleterious situation in Southeast San Diego—in which the conversion of failing public schools to charter schools does make sense. The district had let Gompers and other schools in Southeast San Diego slide into deplorable conditions—reminiscent of Jonathan Kozol's descriptions in *Savage Inequalities*: the students' toilets did not flush, paint peeled from walls, lights were left broken, and playgrounds were dustbowls. More important than poor material resources was the absence of rich educational resources. For example, when the "old" Gompers started classes in Fall 2004, 14 faculty positions were vacant. Despite constant appeals to the district office, six math and science positions remained unfilled in January. Subjecting students to a string of substitute teachers in broken-down facilities is not acceptable—a situation that led parents to take matters into their own hands, including asking UCSD to join them in their efforts to improve the quality of education for their children.

Moving beyond Ethnographic Description and toward Design Research

Finding the appropriate relation between practitioners and researchers has continually challenged the field of education. The "research-development-dissemination-evaluation" model of the research-practice connection (Brown et al. 1999) currently dominating the field divides the labor between researchers and practitioners. Researchers study important educational questions and transmit their findings to practitioners through publications. Practitioners in districts, schools, and classrooms, in turn, attempt to put research results into practice.

A second dichotomy exists routinely between researchers and practitioners. Practitioners are often the objects of study rather than participants in constructing research and interpreting results. Value orientations, long established in the field, underpin and sustain these dichotomies. The abstract mental work associated with conducting basic research has traditionally been held in higher regard in faculty reward systems than the concrete practical work of applying research to public policy. The conventions and practices of research universities value "discovery research," the separation of subjects from the objects of research, and reports written by members of the academy, not natives (Lagemann 2000). It is no wonder, then, that seeking alternatives to the current situation needs to be done carefully, preferably by faculty with tenure.

When researchers assume little or no responsibility for making their research useful and practitioners assume little or no responsibility for evaluating useful practice, then "neither research nor practice benefits" (Brown et al. 1999:29). If researchers and practitioners consider sharing responsibility for research and practice, then it is possible to consider alternatives to the current situation. I have found that the design research program that Brown et al. (1999) espouse can be used productively in research on education because it concentrates explicitly on improving practice and simultaneously building theory that advances fundamental understanding.

Design research is committed to improving complex educational systems by having researchers and practitioners work together, often for a long-term engagement, to frame research problems and seek their solutions (Brown et al. 1999:33–34). Design research builds on but goes beyond ethnographic research, traditionally defined. From its earliest formulations (e.g., Malinowski 1922), the ethnographic task has involved attempting to describe and interpret events, objects, and people from the point of view of the members of society rather than employing the names, categories, scripts, or schemas derived from either "objective science" or the researcher's own culture. In a manner reminiscent of Mills's call for a sociological imagination, "critical ethnographers" argue that we need to shift the focus of our research attention—studying the powerful not the powerless and challenging questionable legal, medical, media, and corporate practices. If we look at any institution, convention, policies, or practices from the standpoint of those who have the least power, then we would be in a better position to expose the ideas, practices, and histories of groups that have been silenced (Apple 2006).

My CREATE colleagues and I incorporate the injunction from critical ethnography to document oppression in its many forms and to make this information accessible to the public. But we feel we cannot only be critics. We try to aid in the reconstruction of educational environments. And we resist dividing the labor between ethnographers and practitioners in which researchers conduct "basic research" and practitioners implement research findings. We attempt to implement a program in which practitioners and researchers co-construct basic knowledge and simultaneously attempt to build progressive policy.

While still remaining faithful to anthropologists' "emic" perspective, some ethnographers have also become somewhat critical of the power dynamics inherent in the relationships between observer and participant. They have recognized, as Geertz notes, "we [researchers] see the lives of others through the lenses of our own grinding and that they look back on ours through ones of their own" (Gonzalez 2004:17). This critical self-reflection has led to a reformulation of researcher roles, at least in some corners of ethnographically informed educational research. One such role shift involves the move from: "being a so-called participant observer to becoming an especially observant participant. This means paying close attention to not only one's point of view as an observer but also to one's relations with others (who one is studying and working with) and one's relations with oneself" (Erickson 1996:7).

Worrying about "one's relations with others" and convinced that ethnography—or any scientific investigation for that matter—is not politically neutral, critical ethnographers have made explicit their political, cultural, and ideological assumptions in the analysis. Because researchers cannot avoid using analytic terms and categories that are politically loaded, I agree with critical ethnographers who assert that all analytic

statements must be subjected to scrutiny to determine whose interests are being served, and whose are being suppressed.

Some Challenges in Conducting Design Research and Doing Public Sociology

It should be clear from the above summary of my current work that I am deeply involved in attempting to construct equitable learning environments while studying that process. Furthermore, I have definite opinions. Statements interpreting a school board's action as "a naked attempt to decapitate the leadership of a burgeoning movement," the school board's vote as a "begrudging concession," and the reassignment of a principal as a "precipitous firing" are not exactly exemplars of the "objective," "neutral," or "disinterested" observations ethnographers are traditionally taught to compose. Against this brief historical chronicle, I will now present some of the many possibilities and limitations entailed in trying to do a public sociology through design research, using my previous research on AVID and my current school reform efforts to simultaneously construct productive learning environments for low-income students of color and conduct research on that process as examples.

Because researchers intervene in the activity by participating in its design and the design of the research about that activity, researchers' actions partially constitute them. The special nature of design research makes explicit the ethical issues that are embedded (often implicitly) in the conduct of other styles or forms of research. A carefully documented ethnographic study of any organization, but especially one self-consciously trying to engage in change, will inevitably expose tensions, contradictions, and gaps between intentions and actions.

We have found that participants, naturally enough, want to emphasize the positive aspects of their organization and students' learning, while ethnographically informed researchers are more likely to want to "tell it like it is." This difference engenders tensions over which aspects of events are to be made public. Because of my commitment to designing schools that alter the conventional manner in which education is delivered to poorly performing students, some academic colleagues as well as reporters from newspapers have both questioned my ability and, by extension, the ability of CREATE, to offer "fair" assessments of the development of the schools and the students' performance in them. My response to these detractors is to say that the activity of conducting research is never value neutral. Even the declaration of value neutrality or presuppositionless inquiry is a political position—and probably impossible to achieve in practice. Researchers, especially those engaged in observational studies, shape research by their selection of topics to investigate, materials to analyze, instances of data to interpret (Cicourel 1964; Levinson and Sutton 2001; Peshkin 1991). Researchers do not simply observe and report "brute facts"; they mold materials into interpretations.

The inevitable reflexive relation between researchers and objects of study is made even more complicated in our design research because of the special relationship that we have to the schools. These special relations cut two ways. On the one hand, they facilitate entrée because some degree of trust has been established because of our involvement in the political fracas that led to the formation of Preuss and GCMS; on the other hand, reviewers can conclude that our objectivity is clouded by these close relations. Rather than ignore these close relations, we acknowledge and make them visible in our analyses. Therefore, our findings cannot be viewed as some objective

representation of the "truth," but, instead, our most thorough and accurate representations of our interpretations of research materials.

Furthermore, this difference in interests reaffirms that status differences between researchers and practitioners need to be negotiated constantly in design research. At a minimum, the reflexive relationship between researchers and participants needs to be made an explicit part of the analysis (Cicourel 1964; Harding 1998). This injunction means attending not only to theory, data gathering and analysis, but the relation between researcher and practitioner as well. Research cannot proceed without participants' support, trust, and active engagement.

Trying to Resolve the Ambiguity of Multiple Roles

While the tenets of our approach can be clearly stated in theory, the new researcher roles that derive from design research are difficult to negotiate in practice. Ongoing, close interaction between practitioners and researchers promises richer and more authentic findings than might emerge from a more traditional study. In practice, the complexities associated with collaboration are daunting. In our work with Preuss and GCMS, we attempt to go beyond writing a description of "what's going on here" (the goal of classical ethnography), and we attempt to go beyond assessing the fidelity of the relationship between policy-as-intended with policy-as-enacted (as occurs in traditional evaluation).

In addition to carrying out our university-mandated annual evaluation of the Preuss School and studies of the adaptation of the principles that the Preuss School developed by other schools, I occupy many other roles simultaneously. These put my CREATE colleagues and myself into many situations that renders the research a complex and conflict-laden process. The circumstances that result from school–university collaborations places us in the position of interacting with district leaders, principals, and teachers, especially when CREATE provides technical assistance in the form of after-school programs, tutors, computers, parent education, and teacher professional-development opportunities. The ensuing relationships provide an entrée to schools and other educational situations and also help build the rapport necessary for effective ethnography and documentation. But gaining access to people in positions of power generates problems of another sort. Because I want my research results and recommendations heard by policy makers, I must avoid softening controversial conclusions or reducing complex issues to 20-second sound bites.

My most complex role mixes political advocate with basic researcher. Led by Cecil Lytle, members of the planning committee advocated on behalf of the proposed on-campus charter school before committees of the UCSD Academic Senate, the UC Regents, members of the legislature, and community groups in the city. When it was my turn to speak, I grounded my presentation in research, citing those studies that suggested schools could make a difference in the lives of underserved youth. But there was never any doubt about my position. I did not present a neutral assessment of tracking practices, for example. Critical of the underrepresentation of low-income students of color in high-track classes, I was clearly an advocate for the idea of the campus becoming intimately involved in the education of underserved youth by building a school that prepares students to be prepared to go to college, if they so choose.

My mixed researcher–advocate role was even more intense in the run-up to the establishment of GCMS. After Lytle and I were approached by the outgoing SDUSD Superintendent, Alan Bersin, and Gompers neighborhood parents, we attended twice-weekly planning meetings at the school. These meetings, which started in September 2004 and lasted until March 2005, when the school board finally approved the charter petition, often went from 5:00 p.m.–8:00 p.m. on Tuesday and Thursday evenings. Follow-up meetings with the deposed principal took place over Sunday breakfasts. Because the parents had family or work responsibilities, they often could not attend the entire meeting every evening. The constantly changing cast of characters necessitated repeating the group's work to gain consensus. I can't remember how many times I had to clarify that UCSD was not going to "take over" Gompers and run it as a UCSD entity in the way that UCSD manages Preuss. Often, seemingly established positions on curriculum, governance, and the like changed when new parents joined the debate.

When Lytle and I returned to the relative quiet of university life, we often wondered what would emerge from the organized chaos of planning meetings. While at UCSD, I often found myself dreading yet another three-hour meeting in a stuffy room without food. But when we returned to the fervor and passion expressed by engaged parents and teachers, we knew it was impossible to abandon this living example of democracy in action, even when more pristine university commitments beckoned.

In discussions about the theory of action to guide GCMS or the design of its academic plan, I also stated my position clearly. I believed that teachers, with university and community support, could create a school with a college-going culture of learning in the Gompers neighborhood. Again, when trying to convince parents—and, later, the school board—that a school with a rigorous curriculum supported by academic and social scaffolds was warranted and possible, I grounded my position in research evidence.

Parents, teachers, the teachers' union, community groups, and the SDUSD were not the only constituents that needed to be convinced that CREATE should extend its partnership work into low-income communities. The UCSD administration needed to be convinced as well. This situation was tenuous because our move to Gompers coincided with the arrival of another new chancellor. Citing concerns over the extra costs associated with running a school (transportation, extra salaries, etc.) in an uncertain budgetary world, the chancellor and her senior staff expressed alarm that CREATE might be promising to grant GCMS the same status as the Preuss School. Even when Lytle and I made it clear that Gompers would establish an independent 301c3 charter, and we would play mostly an advisory role (serving on the school's board of directors, conducting research, advising on curriculum and instruction), the UCSD administration's concerns were not quelled.

Issues raised when we first proposed the on-campus charter school resurfaced: active K–12 involvement is not in the university's mission. We parried that point by reminding our colleagues that extending the Preuss model to urban schools is a vital part of CREATE's mission. New concerns were raised. What if the school failed, we were asked. Lytle and I were taken aback by the fear of failure critique, given that our university engages in many risky and controversial research endeavors: stem cell research, climate change research, cancer research. Could it be that concern masks a deeper one, a widely held belief that "those kids" cannot succeed, even when afforded a powerful system of social and academic supports?

Trying to Resolve the Conundrum of Unwitting Access to Insider Knowledge

My multiple roles produce another complication—this having to do with unwittingly gaining access to insider knowledge. Many parents, community members, and SDUSD educators know me only as a practitioner who shares their desire to enable disadvantaged students to obtain better opportunities to learn, not as a member of a research team studying school improvement, the Preuss School, and GCMS. As a result, I sometimes find myself privy to information that is significant to the research project but that was not explicitly marked as such. The question that arises in such situations is: what to do with the information? Can I "use" it in my descriptions? Or is this information off the record? I often wish I had a two-brimmed hat of the sort Sherlock Holmes is often depicted wearing. On one bill I would write *researcher.* On the other I'd write *educator,* to remind the people with whom I interact what my role is on any particular occasion.

During the course of our study of school reform in San Diego (Hubbard et al. 2006), my colleagues and I developed a strategy that helps resolve the ambiguity presented by access to insider knowledge that I continue to use today. Like journalists who distinguish between "on-the-record" and "off-the-record" comments, we treat any information acquired in a situation not formally designated as a research encounter as off the record. Only information that has been acquired through official tape-recorded interviews, public presentations, or published documents is used as grounds for the interpretations and conclusions that appear in print. Or information we initially receive off the record is put on the record by conducting a formal interview. These strategies only partially respond to the challenge, however. We must take seriously the need to develop more systematic and transparent methods to limit others' perception of researchers as spying critics instead of helping practitioners.

Forging Collaborative Relationships

Even as trusting relationships between researchers and practitioners grow, differences between the two remain. Researchers and practitioners come from different backgrounds and, in some respects, privilege different things. Practitioners want to learn about the strategies that will make the most improvement in their local situation. Researchers are more interested in abstracting generalizations from local circumstances. These are not necessarily mutually exclusive priorities. They can be supportive if both are thoughtful. Yet they can impede collaborations because each somewhat differently shapes the way business is conducted. Thus, collaborative arrangements that lead to real improvement in teaching and learning require conscious effort.

In our research, we are committed to constructing opportunities for a conversation with our educational colleagues. One way of doing so is to report preliminary data and analysis around a particular topic. My CREATE colleagues, Makeba Jones and Susan Yonezawa, conduct focus groups with students about their perceptions of schools before and after their conversion from a large comprehensive school to smaller, more personalized schools.

Collaborative conversations are also fostered by joint publications. During the course of our research on AVID, I wrote a piece with its director (Swanson et al. 1994) and papers with the principal of the Preuss School (Alvarez and Mehan 2004, 2006).

Jones and Yonezawa make oral presentations, prepare analytic reports, and produce joint publications for the educators so they can assess the school's development incorporating students' perspective on the conversion of large to smaller schools (Jones and Yonezawa 2002).

For practitioner colleagues, co-constructing publications based on project findings has meant learning a new language. For my research colleagues and me, this process has meant becoming sensitive to the multiple dimensions and challenges in school improvement. For example, AVID characterizes the success of students in their program as a function of their "individual determination." We proposed, based on our research, that the success of AVID students was influenced considerably by the social capital generated by AVID teachers and counselors who mediated relations between students and their academic teachers and college admissions officers. Many conversations and exchanges of drafts transpired before the AVID educators realized that our interpretation emphasizing social processes did not negate the individual actions of students or undercut the integrity of their theory of action. Eventually, AVID incorporated expressions we used to describe the program, such as "social and academic scaffolds" and "social capital" in their descriptions.

A similar, although much less contentious, process has unfolded with the Preuss School. The school principal quickly saw the connection between social science concepts and the school's innovative practices. She now incorporates research-based terminology such as *scaffolding* and *detracking* in her many presentations about Preuss to professional audiences and the constant stream of educators, researchers, and politicians who visit the school. In both cases, a negotiated editing process produced a narrative that was mutually acceptable to researchers and practitioners and helped us guard against producing an account that was self-serving and glossy.

Conclusion

In my recent work, I have attempted to create and describe equitable educational environments, not just document educational inequality. My UCSD colleagues and I envision CREATE as an "educational field station" in which we simultaneously provide technical, cultural, and structural resources to schools with high proportions of underrepresented minority students; conduct basic and design research at our on-campus school and other public schools; and make the lessons we collaboratively learn about how to build a college-going culture available to researchers, educators, and policy makers in the educational field.

These moves have brought me closer to C. Wright Mills's injunction to make empirical research relevant for public policy. Mills's call for applying the sociological imagination has been reframed as "public sociology" and "critical ethnography." Buroway (2005) reminds us that sociology originated with a moral imperative. Marx, Weber, and Durkheim (the "founding fathers" or "holy trinity" of sociology), each in their own way, was driven by an appraisal of and attempt to remedy the malaise engendered by modernity: alienation, inequality, hyperrationality, domination, anomie. As sociology fought for legitimacy among the social sciences, however, it imported positivism, a move that pushed the moral commitment to the margins.

Richard Shweder reminds us: "the knowable world is incomplete if seen from any one point of view, incoherent if seen from all points of view at once, and empty if seen from nowhere in particular" (2006:3). Given the choice between incompleteness,

incoherence, and emptiness, Shweder opts for incompleteness, a stance critical ethnographers and I would support. Critical ethnographers have replaced the grand objectivist vision of speaking from a universalist, presumably objective, standpoint with the more valid one of speaking from a historically and culturally situated standpoint (Foley and Valenzuela 2006) and reject the incoherence, intellectual chaos, and nihilism that can arise when one privileges no view at all—the stance of some radical, postmodern skeptics (Shweder 2006).

Critical ethnographers offer cultural critiques by writing about ruling groups, ruling ideologies, and institutions, often from the underside. Writing a critical ethnography is a political statement (Foley and Valenzuela 2006). It can give voice to the voiceless and challenge the taken-for-granted assumptions and actions of the privileged. Here, researchers aim "to use their scholarship to assist various decolonizations" (Wood 1999:3). The egalitarian ideal of cotheorized and cowritten ethnographies takes anthropology in exciting new directions, but it is not easy to "decolonize" research. The pressures from the academy to produce "scientific" research (i.e., individualized, objective discovery) works against letting participants decide research questions and contribute to publications as does the instinct to make the report look good to the academy and pleasing to the natives (Foley 2007).

Buroway et al. (2004) seek to restore a balance between basic research and a commitment to social justice. It is not enough for sociologists and anthropologists to write op-ed articles for newspapers or appear on television talk shows because these are often thin pieces aimed at passive audiences. Instead, they challenge sociologists and anthropologists to enter the dialogue about issues of social concern based on bodies of theoretical knowledge and peer-reviewed empirical findings. Without a solid theoretical and empirical foundation, sociological and anthropological claims can evaporate into shrill and empty critiques. Without a commitment to social justice, even well-crafted empirical studies will not necessarily further the public interest.

My experience with design research in the service of a public sociology suggests general implications for researcher–practitioner collaborations. The challenge for such collaborations is, however, to respect the local needs of practitioners, while on the other to develop more useable and generative knowledge for the field. Design research demands that investigation and the development of an end product or innovation occur in cycles of design, enactment, analysis, and redesign. The skills, goals, and knowledge of the participants, as well as the relationships that exist between the actors involved in the work, significantly affect the ability to build and transfer theoretical understandings. Design-research projects, followed by the joint authorship of a publication, illustrate the advantages of collaboration around problems of practice. These intimate collaborations illustrate how a researcher can become an actor who is instrumental in changing practice, and practitioners can acquire a new language that guides their work.

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Notes

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1. For more information on Gompers Charter School, see http://www.gomperscharter.org.

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