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## First Do No Harm: A Reply to Courtney Cazden

JUDITH KLEINFELD

University of Alaska

*This brief note is in response to Courtney Cazden's article, "Can Ethnographic Research Go Beyond the Status Quo?" in the Spring 1983 issue of the Anthropology and Education Quarterly. I argue that educators who reject anthropological contributions are doing so not because they find anthropology "unhelpful in their work." Rather they believe anthropology is doing harm. Cultural differences are replacing cultural deprivation as the fashionable excuse for school failure. CROSS-CULTURAL EDUCATION; SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT; CULTURAL DIFFERENCES; CULTURAL EXPLANATIONS.*

In her article, "Can Ethnographic Research Go Beyond the Status Quo?" Courtney Cazden reflects upon the contribution that anthropology is making to education (Cazden 1983). Unlike most writers on this worn topic, Cazden does not celebrate ethnography, recommending it to educators with sweaty enthusiasm.

Cazden sees promise unrealized. Indeed, she finds only two clear cases where anthropology has improved educational practice—Shirley Brice Heath's work with Appalachian children (Heath 1982) and the Kamehameha Early Education Program in Hawaii (Calfree, Cazden, Duran, Griffin, Martus, and Willis 1981). And, Cazden scrupulously points out, anthropologists rarely suggested educational innovations in the Kamehameha Program; they typically contributed to a "consensus," agreeing for cultural reasons with program designs that educators and psychologists proposed for other reasons.

Cazden makes an important point in this article: educators would find anthropology more helpful if anthropologists moved "from descriptions of failure to suggestions of how to achieve success" (Cazden 1983:37). But Cazden—and other anthropologists who have asked why educators are uninterested in their work—misunderstands critical aspects of "What's going on here?" These remarks, I emphasize, are not intended as criticism of Cazden's well-argued article. Cazden's article, because it raises these issues in terms of a concrete situation, provides a useful occasion to discuss the issue. (Indeed, I began this reply a year ago under the title "It's a Bird! It's a Plane! It's Anthropology!" in response to a particularly pretentious AEQ piece that had announced the discovery of an educational platitude.)

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Judith Kleinfeld is Professor of Psychology, Institute of Social and Economic Research, University of Alaska, Fairbanks, AK 99701.

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Cazden begins her discussion by quoting a sign reputed to hang in the Alaska Department of Education:

**WE DON'T NEED ANY MORE  
ANTHROPOLOGICAL EXPLANATIONS  
OF SCHOOL FAILURE**

This sign, she believes, actually may not exist. But it illustrates what she takes to be a key issue—educators' indifference to anthropology, their view that "our kind of social science is unhelpful in their work" (Cazden 1983:33).

First, let me verify the existence of that sign reputed to hang in the Alaska Department of Education. I saw it. It was written in white chalk in the upper left hand corner of the chalkboard in the Department's conference room. The sign was written in longhand, each letter carefully sculpted, in the manner of teachers who write on the chalkboard directions that they do not want erased.

This conference room (called The Bull Pen) is where Department of Education staff meet to plan educational projects for Alaska. The schooling of Indian and Eskimo children in isolated rural villages is the major educational issue in the state. Anthropology should have something to contribute. The Department of Education staff who met under that sign were rejecting that contribution.

Cazden is mistaken, however, about the meaning of the sign, about why educators were rejecting that contribution. The people who met beneath the sign did not interpret it to mean that anthropology was "unhelpful in their work." Far from it. No one would have gone to the bother of forming each letter so carefully if that alone had been the point. According to the people I asked, the sign meant what it said: "We don't need any more anthropological explanations of school failure."

The point of the signmaker and those who met under it was that anthropology was doing harm. It had an effect on educational practice, but that effect was pernicious. *Cultural differences are replacing cultural deprivation as the fashionable excuse for school failure.* The Department of Education was announcing that it was not buying this excuse. The staff was meeting under that sign.

In my experience at a university where anthropology has been taken seriously, very seriously, where it has become the dominant set of ideas presented to students preparing to teach in Eskimo and Indian villages, many results have been harmful. I am not arguing that anthropology always is harmful or that it contributes nothing of value to education. I am arguing that where anthropology is the dominant perspective education students receive, the results can be harmful.

First, serious educational issues are ignored when they do not fit current anthropological paradigms. University classes give scant attention to pedagogical problems—for example, the basic problem of how

to organize classroom instruction in a village school where a single teacher may be responsible for five subjects and eight grade levels. Yet how to manage such a classroom—how to diagnose each child's level of skill, how to figure out just what instruction the child needs, how to evaluate progress, how to reteach in some other way what the child has not learned—stagger new teachers. "Could you please give me a copy of your classroom schedule?" new teachers timidly asked an experienced teacher after attending a teacher-training course that had dealt endlessly with cultural change, cultural conflict, cultural preservation, and so on.

On the other hand, minor matters that fit ethnographic paradigms—such as cultural differences in "pause time"—become major issues, the subject of papers and invited lectures and conference programs and summer sessions. Yet many experienced teachers doubt whether cultural differences in pause time cause any serious problem in communication between Eskimo and Indian children and white teachers. If these cultural differences occur at all, they occur sporadically and are overridden quickly.

Anthropology has given education students a new and somewhat more sophisticated set of rationalizations for giving up. Let me illustrate the point by quoting (with her permission) from the paper of a student enrolled in my educational research course at the University of Alaska.

This particular student, whom I will call Irene, is a middle-aged woman returning to college. She is a serious student. Irene came to my office to talk about selecting a research problem for the semester. She wanted to find out if there was a more effective way to teach reading to village Indian and Eskimo children. I suggested some articles on the topic and asked her to turn in a draft of the first assignment, identifying a research problem and explaining its significance.

Irene wrote:

The research question is this, "What are the specific reading problems of Native Americans?"

The Native American Eskimo, American Indians and others have wanted to keep their own ways of life. They should be allowed to continue their own ways. Their language as well as any other should be written in reading books and tests.

Educators must realize English is known the world over. Yet, Native tribes don't communicate in English, but their own language.

Achievement tests and major reading companies should have materials printed in all languages so that each student will have a chance to reach the norms.

If the Native children were given reading achievement tests in their language and were not held responsible for it in English the reading would be different.

Irene expressed a viewpoint I have found over and over again in students who have half-absorbed "anthropology and education" courses. They come away with one simplistic paradigm:

- The educational problems of Native children are caused by conflicts between the culture of the school and the culture of the community.
- It is wrong to change Native culture.
- Therefore the school must change to fit the culture.

Irene applied this paradigm straightforwardly. The reading problem, in her view, is caused by cultural differences between English and Native languages. Teaching children to read English is wrong since "they should be allowed to continue their own ways." So if the school just changes to fit the culture, providing books and reading achievement tests in Native languages and not holding them "responsible for [reading in] English," the reading problem disappears. That Native languages were not traditionally written down and that students would remain illiterate in English does not trouble this anthropologically-enlightened education student.

Irene's paper illustrates what that sign at the Department of Education is about. Educational problems are not to be solved; they are to be "thought away." In talking with rural teachers, I have been impressed at how hard many teachers search for an explanation of any problem—whether it is that Oscar can't read, or that Molly is taking money from other children's desks, or that Agnes is moody and sullen—that is rooted in cultural differences. Once the teachers come up with some cultural explanation (and one can always be concocted), their relief is palpable. The problem has vanished.

Professors who teach anthropology to education students need to recognize that there are standard misinterpretations of the concepts they present. They should discuss explicitly these misinterpretations and other abuses of ethnographic inquiry. In an earlier piece (Kleinfeld 1975), I pointed out some of these, such as teachers' proclivity for learning about Their Culture by requiring students to write interesting essays on cultural topics that the teacher cannot bring himself or herself to critique. "We don't need alcoholics, junior anthropologists, or religious fanatics," one village teacher wrote on a paper. "If you're not one of these, come on up."

One answer, then, to the question of why many educators ignore anthropology is that they see it as providing teachers with facile rationalizations for giving up. But there are other reasons. When I asked about that sign at the Alaska Department of Education, one person said people he knew did not read anthropology because the reports were always so long; they never got to the point. This response suggests a limitation in Cazden's view that anthropologists identify what educa-

tional practices lead to success. The discipline does not lend itself to snappy little prescriptions. One of its contributions is to make educators aware of complexities; it sensitizes teachers to aspects of educational situations that they have overlooked.

Going "beyond the status quo" does not necessarily mean coming up with "promising practices." Rather, anthropology needs to go beyond the "culture conflict paradigm" itself as the explanation for educational failure. Anyone who has watched Eskimo children mimic exactly the individual dancing styles of their white teachers, a colleague pointed out, would hesitate to argue that classroom problems come about because Eskimo children cannot catch on to white teachers' communicative codes. As Ogbu (1982) suggests, the fundamental issue is not the existence of cultural differences in codes; these commonly occur in transcultural learning situations, but people commonly figure out ways of dealing with them. The fundamental issue is that some cultural groups in some circumstances decide that they do not want to acquire the attributes of the majority culture. If this is true, educators need from anthropologists a better understanding of how and why these cultural decisions are made, the meaning to children of what teachers ask them to do, and whether there are possibilities for reconciliation.

Let me add two other minor points about the way anthropologists present their work to educators. Because ethnographies are complex, are lengthy, and do not typically provide easy answers, they are likely to reach teachers by way of university professors who assign these readings. Many of these professors, themselves trained in educational psychology, are irritated by a presentation that assumes a "holy war" between anthropology and educational psychology. Both perspectives help. Second, so much anthropological writing labels clearly the Good Guys (Natives, children) and Bad Guys (majority culture, teachers). In the end, the measuring instrument is the sensibility of the anthropologist. One does not trust a sensibility that makes simple moral judgements.

Educators have need for anthropology's "special ways of knowing about the relationship of actions to their contexts and their meaning to participants" (Cazden 1983:38). But anthropology has become apology, a conservative force supporting, rather than going beyond, the educational status quo.

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## Editor's Note

*Invitation to a Dialogue*

Courteney Cazden was invited by both Judith Kleinfeld and the Editor to respond to this statement. At this point, she chose to make only this brief response:

Kleinfeld is brave to write so bluntly, especially in *AEQ*. I share her concern and have often cited her earlier statement to that effect. For the rest, I have had my say.

Both Kleinfeld and Cazden anticipate that others may wish to voice their position on the *issues* raised in the two papers. Therefore, we invite comments from interested *AEQ* readers. If this invitation prompts responses deemed of interest to the readership, we will publish them here, in whole or in part, and give both Kleinfeld and Cazden one more chance to respond. We ask potential contributors to this dialogue to adhere to the following procedures: comments must be submitted in four copies and must be limited to 5 double spaced pages of prose (references will be collected in a single bibliography); responses may bear short titles or simply be labeled "comment"; authors should give full names and an institutional affiliation or place location (e.g., post office address); contributors should realize that in the interest of brevity, comments submitted will not necessarily be included or included in their entirety, and that, as with all material submitted to *AEQ*, comments become the copyrighted property of the Council on Anthropology and Education. Comments, plus the opportunity for reactions by the two original authors, will be published in the Summer, 1984 issue of *AEQ*. Only papers received in the editor's office by 7 March 1984 will be considered for inclusion in the printed dialogue.

— H.F.W.