Journal of Research in Rural Education, Winter, 1993, Vol. 9, No. 3, 125-136

Laotian Refugees in a Small-Town School: Contexts and Encounters

Tom Schram
University of New Hampshire

I present a case study drawn from a two-year ethnographic study of Laotian adolescents in a rural New England school district where refugee resettlement has emerged as a factor of local social change. I describe how formal classroom encounters between Laotian students, their American peers, and their teacher were influenced by the community context and by a school culture in which tracking served as the organizational framework shaping the behavioral and instructional options of teachers and students. Particular attention is directed toward patterns of dependence and resistance that emerged, often unexpectedly, between culturally diverse student groups, and the ways in which the teacher mediated this interaction. My analysis highlights linkages between perceptions of competence and peer worth, the teacher's role in the social organization of work-related talk in the classroom, and the constraints and benefits peculiar to the small school setting.

Introduction

The broad aim of this paper is to invite reflection on an issue of growing significance to educators who live and work in small communities: how teachers, students, and local community members create the climate in which the education and integration of refugee students takes place. Through a case study of cross-cultural encounters in a rural New England high school, I explore the interplay of community context, the social organization of the school, and the structure of instructional processes in the classroom. My account focuses on the attempts of one teacher to mediate social interaction and cultural conflict in a lower-track English class comprised of Laotian refugees and at-risk American students.[1]

Researchers cannot say with any certainty what the population projections for refugees in this country will be in the future, although recent figures from the Office of Refugee Resettlement (1991) indicate that the influx of refugees from all over the world shows no signs of abating soon. It is clear that some areas, typically urban, have been more affected than others by the resettlement of thousands of Southeast Asians coming to the United States over the past 10 to 15 years. Of more immediate concern here is a pattern of "secondary migration" (moving from the site of initial resettlement) that has brought Lao, Hmong, Cambodian, and Vietnamese refugees to unprepared small towns and rural areas throughout the country (Caplan, Choy, & Whitmore, 1991; Trueba, Jacobs & Kirton, 1990).

A former mill town of 7,000, the site I call Millshore represents one of a growing number of rural communities impacted by this phenomenon. In this case, the initial sponsoring of several Lao refugees by the local Catholic church in the early 1980s led to a far-reaching effort by these few individuals to locate relatives and friends throughout the United States and urge their relocation to Millshore. When I began my study in 1990, Millshore's ethnic Lao community numbered between 30 and 40 families. From the perspective of most teachers, students, and residents with whom I worked in this small New England town, there was no precedent and little preparedness for such

[1]The Laotians who resided in the local community were predominantly representative of the *Lao Lum* (lowland or ethnic Lao), a group that includes rural villagers from the lowlands, former government bureaucrats, and soldiers of the Lao faction that supported the United States until 1975. Following local usage, I employ the general term "Laotian" when referring to the town's ethnic Lao community, and "American" for the town's white majority population.

Tom Schram is Assistant Professor, Department of Education, University of New Hampshire, Durham, New Hampshire 03824-3595. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 1992 meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Francisco.

tangible change at the local level. It is in such a context that the nature of the school and the work of educators assume special significance.

Orienting Concerns and Methods

For a two-year period from 1990-1992, I conducted ethnographic research with teachers, students, and community members in Millshore. This work focused on the social and academic adjustment of Laotian refugee adolescents within the small and, until recent years, ethnically homogeneous high school setting. Central to this research was the study of what Erickson (1982a) calls "immediate environments of learning": the analysis of how specific instructional contexts are socially constituted by teachers and students. I focused particularly on the role of teachers as mediators between students, lesson content, and the structural arrangements that made it easy or difficult for language minority students to participate meaningfully in classroom interactions.

Cazden and Mehan (1989) stress the need for understanding the instructional processes that help or hinder students by emphasizing not only the cultural dimensions of school life, but also the interaction between student and teacher. They also suggest the need to understand how teachers shape, and are shaped by, the levels of classroom social organization that channel students toward success or failure. In similar fashion, questions that guided my fieldwork highlight a concern for both cultural and contextual variables in the interpretation of the students' classroom performance. Beyond knowing the English language and understanding school culture, what factors seem to influence the ability of Millshore's Laotian students to communicate effectively with their teachers and American peers? Under what circumstances do the Laotian students participate actively and competently in formal classroom learning? How do peer interactions inside the classroom, and community perceptions outside the classroom, affect the learning process for the Laotian students?

Examination of interactive processes involved in the teaching and learning situation—not simply discrete individuals or institutions—necessitated an approach that allowed me to move among various contexts and to test interpretations while still in the field. For the purposes of this case study, I devoted 11 months of my two-year investigation to intensive observation of student-student and student-teacher interactions within one lower-track classroom, taking note of the form and content of classroom talk and conducting informal and formal ethnographic interviews (Spradley, 1979) to determine how participants made sense of their daily encounters.

Guided by my research questions, I spent at least two days each week as a participant observer, sitting with the students during class, participating in selected activities, talking with them before, during, and after lessons, and writing field notes. I conversed primarily with five key informants: Mary, the English classroom teacher; Ann, the English as a Second Language (ESL) instructor; Pon and Phao, two Laotian students in Mary's class; and Keith and Josh, two American students in Mary's class. These four students were representative of the class membership in terms of different achievement levels, social class, and ethnic background, and they were willing to talk openly. These primary data sources were triangulated with secondary sources (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984) that included the following: (a) structured and informal interviews with other students, teachers, administrators, and parents; (b) documents including lesson plans, assignments, tests, local newspapers, and district reports; and (c) observations of faculty and school board meetings, community events, and other activities that helped define the broader context of classroom events.

Immersed in a school structure and culture that tended to categorize refugee and lower-track students together, I had spent the greatest portion of my previous year of fieldwork in classes designated "Basic" or "B-Level." To balance this perspective and gain a more complete understanding of the attitudes and approaches of participants throughout the three-tiered tracking system, I had observed the same teachers providing instruction to students at different levels. For the most part, however, the boundaries of the study were determined by the scope of activities and contacts of the Laotian high school students and their teachers. The school's ESL resource room provided regular opportunities for intensive contact with the Laotian students and also served as a "base" from which I made observations in classroom settings and throughout the school.

In the following section, I describe the school and community context in which classroom events and teacher-student interactions were embedded. The next section provides a focused description of educational encounters within one classroom, with

particular emphasis on the teacher's role in the social organization of work-related talk among the students and between the students and the teacher. My analysis in the final sections highlights the problematic nature of structuring classroom encounters between socially and culturally diverse students in a small school setting.

Millshore: School and Community Context[2]

Studies of refugee resettlement in various settings suggest that community characteristics are of primary importance in determining how refugees affect schools, or at least how they are perceived to affect them (Finnan, 1988; Trueba, Jacobs, & Kirton, 1990; Trueba, Cheng, & Ima, 1993). Millshore's location within northern New England, identified in the 1990 Census as the most ethnically homogeneous region in the United States, accentuates the challenges faced by most culturally distinct "outsiders" who enter the local scene. But to the surprise of many local observers, these factors have not deterred the emergence of a sizeable ethnic Lao community within Millshore, a town that affords inexpensive rental housing and relatively easy access to factories in neighboring towns, where many refugees find work.

At the heart of "traditional" Millshore, and lending its influence to both the school board and town government, is an extended core of families that proudly trace their descent through generations of Millshore residents, some as far back as the town's founding in the late 17th century. With measured reserve, this politically and historically cohesive center has in recent years confronted the scattered influence of a small 1960s counterculture group, an influx of urban commuters seeking "the quiet, country life," and perhaps most unexpectedly, the steadily increasing population of refugees from Laos. Millshore's response to such change, while not antagonistic, has been less than receptive. As one longtime resident noted,

> I guess we're somewhere between a holding tank and a melting pot. But for all the good feeling you get from this town, there's still some sense of underlying tension. It's just not like the days when you could walk from home to the mill every morning and recognize everybody on the street.

A number of Millshore's veteran teachers confirmed the community's strong sense of tradition, noting that the construction of low-income rental housing in recent years had contributed to increased transiency and a "breakdown of the local socioeconomic and family structure." Others described a weakening of the town's historical rootedness, while at the same time noting the persistence, in one form or another, of an "us versus them" mentality. "You're never really considered a true member of Millshore unless you're born here," one teacher commented. "My husband and I have lived here 13 years and we're still considered among the 'new' people."

At the time of my fieldwork, Millshore High School served approximately 220 students, 9% of whom were Laotian. With the exception of one African-American, the remaining 91% were white students of predominantly French-Canadian and Polish ancestry, though most identified themselves as "typical, small-town New Englanders." The district's small size and severely stretched tax base limited the availability of courses and extracurricular activities in the high school, and a firmly entrenched tracking system provided additional differentiation among students. Class sizes averaged 10 to 15 students, with some lower- and upper-level courses numbering as few as four or five students. Observations and interviews with classroom teachers revealed a proud but beleaguered faculty who found it increasingly difficult to experience appreciation for their efforts, particularly from townspeople frustrated with the costs of supporting the school for an increasingly transient and "needy" local population.

Dilemmas and Directions Within the School

Millshore students were placed for their regular academic classes into one of three tracks: college preparatory (C-Level), "average to above-average" (A-Level), or remedial (Basic or B-Level). Laotian students receiving ESL services and generally deemed unable to keep up with the demands of either A- or C-level classes were placed in the slower track. Interviews with school personnel and systematic observations of student and teacher behavior at Millshore highlighted a number of issues pertaining to the tracking system

[2]In this section, I have drawn from my paper, "Players Along the Margin" (Schram, 1994).

and, more generally, to the related difficulties of serving the educational and social needs of the Laotian students.

Tensions between refugee students and other students. American students in the B-level classes were felt by teachers to be less tolerant of the Laotian students than were American students in the faster-track classes. Interviews with many of these American students revealed severe prejudice rooted in perceptions that the Laotian refugees tend not to join in or value majority-dominated school activities, that they "eat smelly food," and the somewhat contradictory concerns that they both "take our jobs" and "live off government handouts." Such attitudes were manifested typically in verbal, rather than physical, abuse toward the Laotian students.

The Laotian students, in turn, tended to view their American B-level classmates as social outcasts whose friendship offered no social or academic advantages. Several expressed confusion and resentment due to their seemingly automatic placement with students whose behavior they found disrespectful and sometimes distasteful and who, according to general student and faculty perceptions, were regarded as "slow" or "dumb.".

Low expectations and labeling of lower-track students. Millshore teachers generally had low expectations for B-level students. Comments and actions by teachers and other school personnel regarding the Lao students, in particular, revealed widespread presumptions about the disability or lower mental ability of these students. But in contrast to findings regarding tracked mainstream American students (Page, 1987, 1991; Schwartz, 1981; Wheelock, 1992), the Laotian students in Millshore's B-level classes did not tend to lower their own expectations and succumb to peer pressure to "take it easy" in school. Conversely, the American B-level students' social differentiation from the top tracks tended to be expressed academically in an unwillingness to participate or perform voluntarily in the classroom.

Paradoxically, the Laotian students' resistance to such negative influences contributed little to their overall academic standing. On the one hand, they displayed the quiet, respectful, and studious behaviors highly valued by Millshore's faculty; they appeared to have a sense of purpose and direction. On the other, the Laotian students' status as good behavioral and motivational models was obscured by teachers' low expectations for their academic achievement and persistent cultural and communicative difficulties with them. These latter concerns, set within a dominant school culture which tended to categorize refugee and lower-track students together, regardless of actual placement, sustained the Laotian students' position as social and academic marginals.

Inadequate resources to meet the special needs of language minority students. Millshore High School offers a stark contrast to many larger districts throughout the country which, due to greater total numbers of enrolled refugee students, qualify for funds from federal and state targeted assistance programs. Special services such as bilingual aides and translators, in-service training, curriculum development, and material acquisition were simply beyond the range of funds generated by the small district. During each of my two years of fieldwork, Millshore's part-time ESL instructor was told there was "no budget" for books and other instructional materials. Some of these materials were purchased with the instructor's own money or through occasional funds diverted from the special education budget. There were no full-time ESL instructors, and neither of the two part-time instructors was certified in ESL. Although encouraged by the district to attend occasional ESL workshops, these instructors were not encouraged to pursue ESL certification.

Mixed Messages from School and Community

The Millshore faculty's definition of Laotian student success hinged on cultural assimilation, with an implicit bias toward facilitating the students' social fit and "getting them through" high school. For all lower-track students, comparatively less emphasis was placed upon enhancing their academic performance. The Laotian students, in turn, seemed intent upon minimizing the more conspicuous aspects of their ethnicity yet did not necessarily seek primary integration in the social sphere of the high school.

Reflecting the wishes of their parents, most Laotian adolescents assumed an instrumental perspective toward formal education: Learning was not necessarily seen in the Lao community as an inherently desirable end in itself. School was a place where they could learn English, learn how to cope with the new American environment, and most importantly, prepare for entry into the labor market. Courses were deemed valuable only insofar as they could be tied directly to future employ-

ment aspirations.[3] The Laotian students viewed active participation in the informal social aspects of their schooling experience (e.g., extracurricular clubs) as taking time away from more pressing academic concerns and drawing unwanted attention to their cultural and linguistic differences.

As noted by Gibson (1988), immigrants and refugees are generally more determined than nonimmigrants of comparable class background to use education as a strategy for upward social mobility. Fueled by high expectations and assumptions about the value of high school for future employment, this strategy assumed particular significance in Millshore, where a number of Laotian parents had experienced the demoralizing shift from high status occupations in Laos (e.g., pilot, government official) to less highly regarded factory work in the United States. The Laotian students' attitudes toward school and employment, especially those of the boys, were shaped by a determination to be more successful than their parents were in this country.

These data are consistent with Trueba, Cheng, and Ima's (1993) finding that the current employment and income levels of Asian immigrant parents are important, but are the not the sole, or even main, determinant of their children's academic performance. Rather, their findings suggest that upper-class socialization and value orientation in the home country leads to more effective use of resources in the host country. This would likely have implications for those Lao in Millshore who had held high status positions in Laos, although I found only limited evidence of this.

The Laotian girls were more intent than the boys upon integration in the social scene, but were compromised by contradictory messages from the Laotian community. They were expected to contribute to the family economically and also to maintain the well-being of the home and family through attention to more traditional domestic responsibilities, especially care of siblings and elders. In what might be a typical response to such pressures, one Laotian girl had decided to pursue training as a nurse upon graduation, with the sole intent of remaining in the community to care for family members.

In summary, Millshore's Laotian students found themselves in conflict-ridden roles that virtually guaranteed they would be at odds with members of the school and community and, at times, their own families. With few exceptions, their classroom experiences were framed by a deficit view of their abilities, an administrative perspective that stressed social fit above enhancement of academic performance, and differing expectations from school and community.

Encounters in the Classroom

In this section, I examine the "immediate environments of learning" created for Laotian students within one teacher's classroom at Millshore High School. Drawing in part upon the concept of participation structure as defined by Erickson (1982b) and Philips (1983), I explore how this teacher attempted to mediate patterns of dependence and resistance that emerged between herself and the Laotian and American students in her class. Participation structure is a concept used to define types of social encounters according to the allocation of participants' interactional rights and obligations. Teachers generally direct particiation structures and students respond, although these structures vary according to the number of students interacting with the teacher, the relative status among students, the clarity of the academic task, and the consistency with which the teacher enacts his or her own role (Erickson, 1982b; Philips, 1983; see also Page, 1987).

Classroom Participants

Mary Navarro was a second-career beginning teacher of English at Millshore High School. Her feelings about the backgrounds of the Laotian students in her class went beyond respect to appreciation and even awe. A Cuban refugee herself with a middle-class, academically oriented upbringing, she once commented, "I don't think I've ever spent a day in my life when my heritage hasn't come into play."[4] Her instruction was sensitive to the language and cultural difficulties

[3]Trueba, Cheng, and Ima (1993) describe a similar perspective among Lao and Cambodian refugees on the West coast, and attribute low motivation to excell academically or to pursue post-secondary degrees, in part, to the fact that few of these refugee families had the experience of adults with a college education. They contrast these groups with some educated Vietnamese families who attended Western schools for a second or third generation.

[4]See Schram (1994) for an in-depth analysis of the relationship between Mary's cultural self-awareness and the manner in which she adapted her behavior and teaching strategies in response to situational demands in the classroom.

faced by these students, but she did not intentionally lower her standards because of their backgrounds. Among students and parents, she earned a reputation as a determined and innovative instructor who kept high standards and expected her students to meet them.

At the same time, Mary displayed anxieties and insecurities common to the beginning teacher and also expressed concern over the apparent lack of support among Millshore faculty members. She did not live in the Millshore community and did not have much first-hand knowledge of her students' backgrounds, other than what she observed in her classroom.

Mary taught American Literature to a class comprising 11 "lower track" juniors, three of whom were Laotian refugees with limited understanding of the English language and limited experience with American culture. These three students received one or two periods of supplemental ESL instruction each day in a self-contained resource room. The other eight students in the class shared an American working class background and a fundamental ambivalence toward schooling. Five students from this latter group attended an afternoon vocational training program in another community. All eight were designated as "problem" or "low ability" students. Individuals from both groups, Laotian and American, bore the burden of cultural marginality and academic stigmatization.

The Laotian students typically sat clustered at the front of the classroom in the two rows closest to the teacher's desk. The Americans scattered singly or in pairs across the remaining three rows. No exchanges occurred between Laotians and Americans in the freewheeling banter prior to the start of class. Laotian students focused independently on schoolwork; American students gossiped and made last minute trips to their lockers for notebooks or assignments. Mary maintained a lively presence from her base of activity at the front of the room, a large table strewn with handouts, books, and folders.

Patterns of Interaction

Participation patterns of the Laotian students in both formal and informal classroom activities were characterized by extraordinary efforts to remain inconspicuous, though not necessarily uninvolved in the task at hand. American student participation, on the other hand, was generally characterized by selective, often resistant engagement in activities, with occasional bursts of focused involvement by one or two individuals. That those students apparently most motivated to comply with Mary's instructional aims—the Laotian refugees—found themselves to some extent dependent upon those most resistant to do so—the American students—emerged as a paradox of the interaction between individuals and groups in her class. Taken together, the following descriptive excerpts highlight this paradox and depict the classroom environment jointly constructed by Mary and her students, including how they came to regard their encounters within that environment.

Bidding for attention. Interruptions by the American students regularly plagued Mary's class. It was common, for example, for students to disrupt the flow of a lesson to request that the class focus on something other than what the teacher had planned:

Ms. N: (adjusting the slide projector): Please take out your journals.
Keith: Can I go to the bathroom?
Ms. N: No. Class has started.
Keith: I just downed an orange soda, and I really need to go.
Ms. N: No. Please take out your journal. Now, what I would like all of you to do when I put this photo up on the screen, without saying a word, is to name . . .
Josh: Name that tune! Yeah! (Pantomimes a drummer.)
Ms. N: . . . to give names to the people pictured and write a dialogue between them. Tomorrow, when you . . .
Josh: Won't be school tomorrow. Snow storm. We're supposed to get eight to ten inches.
Ms. N: That's further north. Now, when I project this photo on the screen . . .

With the instructional routine overlaid by such "interactional dissonance" (Page, 1987, p. 470), the ability of students to grasp procedures, much less the intended meaning of a task, was severely compromised. Feelings of intimidation and insecurity exacerbated by the language barrier intensified the problem for the Laotian students. Their alienation from their more vocal American classmates was compounded by their apparent lack of ability, and their expressed lack of desire, to compete in these spontaneous and self-serving bids for atten-

tion. I spoke with one Laotian student, Phao, after a class punctuated with student interruptions:

Schram: There was a lot of talking in class today.

Phao: Yes. I do not think I wrote down all the right things for the lesson. It is hard to listen to all that [talk] and know what I am supposed to do. I think it is hard for Ms. Navarro, too.

Schram: You didn't seem too interested in what other students were saying.

Phao: Yes, well, no. Sometimes if I see everyone else smiling I will smile, too, even if I don't know why they are smiling. But I always think it is probably not right for me to do that . . . I wonder if Ms. Navarro thinks I am doing the right thing.

Strong patterns of parental socialization based on respect for age and authority further precluded Laotian student involvement in what Mary labeled "these boring little games of one-upsmanship you [American students] play" (cf. Page, 1987, pp.454-455). Forced to mediate these student differences, Mary expressed her frustration:

> What I really want is for the Lao kids to be more vocal and take more initiative. But it seems that any positive reinforcement I give them for their studious behavior only puts more distance between them and the American kids in the class. They become targets of resentment. They're one more thing to remind the [low-track] American kids of their already low status in the school.

Targeting the "on" students. On occasion, the fragmented give-and-take described above shifted to a structure of recitation focused on one responsive and temporarily task-oriented student. No discernible pattern of behavior enabled Mary to predict or even anticipate when this might occur; she merely acknowledged, for example, that "Keith was 'on' today." This was a phenomenon displayed exclusively by the American students in the class. It was markedly distinguished from the Laotian students' characteristically passive attentiveness by the vocal nature of the American student's engagement with the topic at hand. Rarely was a student "on" for two consecutive days.

In what Mary herself described as an instructional compromise, she encouraged the task-oriented student to "carry" the lesson with her. A substantive dialogue occurred between them, and though other students rarely participated, the on-task behavior of that single student typically had the effect of stifling the disruptive one-upsmanship behavior of the class. While acknowledging the inappropriateness of relying on cues from one student to assess the understanding of the group, Mary expressed hope that such positive modeling would influence others in the class:

> I don't gauge collective class comprehension according to a single responsive student. At the same time, I feel myself holding tightly to this phenomenon because it may bring others around to realizing that, in my classroom, asking questions, engaging in constructive discussions, and staying on task are always positively reinforced.

Interviews with Laotian students in the class suggest that these student-teacher dialogues provided an instructional template for them. "It is easier to understand the talk between two people, so I learn more of what the teacher is saying," noted one Lao boy. "The words go so fast when everyone is talking." On the other hand, my observations indicated that this type of interaction contributed to the language minority students' overall dependence on the questions and answers provided by other students. Their motivation to respond to questions was effectively stifled by their expectation that a more competent "other" would provide the necessary information.

Mary was troubled by her role in the fostering of such expectations among the Laotian students, but concerns of time and curriculum coverage compelled her occasionally to "fall back on" this participation structure. Whether a product of her inexperience, frustration, or, more likely perhaps, an instructional situation with few promising alternatives, her practice of targeting an "on" student signaled a disturbing trend: The long-term aim of developing the Laotian students' communicative competence in the classroom setting was effectively compromised for the sake of their immediate acquisition of knowledge.

Taking the bad with the good. Mary's attempts to structure American-Laotian student interaction met with mixed success. Such interaction com-

monly took the form of teacher-assigned pairs or triads working together on a highly structured activity (e.g., vocabulary review). Repeated observations revealed both the potential and the problematic nature of such pairings.

On one occasion, Keith, an American student, was paired with Pon, a Laotian student who had volunteered comments or questions addressed to the whole class only twice in the previous three months. As the two boys pulled their desks next to each other, Mary handed them a copy of the vocabulary review activity, designed as follows: One person selects from an envelope a piece of paper on which is written a vocabulary word from the book they are reading [Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*], and offers a guess as to the word's meaning. The other member of the pair has an answer sheet with definitions and the sentence in which the word appears in the book. If the first individual makes an incorrect response, the person with the answer sheet is directed to provide clues as to the correct response until an answer is determined. Roles are then reversed.

Pon (Selects the word "discredited"): Uh . . . I don't know . . .

Keith: What's the word? (Pon does not say the word, but shows Keith the piece of paper with "discredited" on it.) Discredited. Okay, you know what that means?

Pon: No . . . I don't know. (Pon looks up at Keith)

Keith (pausing for a moment): Okay, listen. If you came home late one night because the cops busted your ass . . . (Pon looks away smiles briefly, and nods his head) . . and you tell your mom this bullshit story about seeing a UFO or some bullshit story like that, and your mom sees that you're all fucked up anyway, then your story will probably be discredited by your mom.

Pon: Um, maybe . . . not believed?

Keith: Yeah, she won't believe it, she doesn't believe it's true. (Keith then takes the envelope from Pon and pulls out the word "formidable.") Formidable. Uh, I don't know. Gimme a hint.

Pon: (Pon looks down at the written definition, smiles, and begins shaking his head.) Maybe . . . I don't know . . . "exciting fear" . . .

Keith: No—that's the definition. Here . . . (grabbing the sheet) . . . let's take a look at it. "Formidable: exciting fear or dread."

The interaction proceeded in this manner, reflecting a pattern that persisted in similar joint activities that involved Pon and his American classmates. Pon did not offer or ask for assistance, but he did accept offers of assistance from his partner. If his American partner found an answer to a problem, Pon occasionally asked, "Which one?", to which his classmate typically responded with a suggested answer.

Although appreciative at one level for the assistance and the opportunity to participate more actively in the class, Pon subsequently expressed to me concern over Keith's foul language and felt that the experience drew unwanted attention to his own English language deficiencies. He found it demoralizing to be in the position of constantly requiring assistance—a dependence highlighted within the focused give-and-take of the paired structure.

For his part, Keith was ambivalent, expressing frustration and resentment over the apparent one-sidedness of the assistance and unfairness of the overall situation. He offered this blunt assessment:

> I don't think Ms. Navarro really cares what I'm getting out of it. Maybe she thinks I'll be a better student for working with those [Laotian] guys, but it doesn't seem fair to always be looking out for them when guys like me need help, too. They're such 'goody-two-shoes' anyway. Hell, we've lived here longer, but they've (teachers) got us pegged . . . but who the hell really cares.

Despite these feelings, Keith demonstrated both a willingness and an ability to assist Pon. In doing so, however, he effectively "deschooled" the context of instruction, drawing Pon into a world beyond the classroom (e.g., "getting busted"). As a coping strategy for Keith, this made perfect sense—replace attention to academics with conversations about a world where he knew more and, in a sense, could assume the expert role. Pon, in marked contrast, was hesitant to share the realities of his family and community life in which little English was spoken and which otherwise accentuated differences between himself and his American classmates:

> I am proud of my family and what they have done, but these [American] students see only that my parents do not speak English and don't always know the way of doing things in this country, so I do not share all of that. I am not only part of a person, but it is only a part of me that I let them see in this school. This is what I have learned to be a student in this school. But a good student, I think, does not act that way [i.e., with disrespect] to the teacher, and I think I can do better [than the American students] in my work.

Statements like that above characterized many conversations I had with Millshore's Laotian students. The remarks also suggest that, through their interactions with others, the Laotian students learned that their academic and social worth in teachers' eyes rested not on solidarity with, but rather on differentiation from, their low-track American classmates. At the same time, they acknowledged that the type of assistance they received (e.g., providing clues in vocabulary exercises) could not be obtained from their limited-English-proficient Laotian peers.

Students like Keith viewed cooperation or friendship with the Laotian students as offering no social or academic advantages. Mary highlighted one possible exception. In enacting the role of "more competent partner," the American students were able to offer a positive response to the school's persistent reminders of their own inferior status, and perhaps contribute to their own sense of self-efficacy. "I think a few of the American kids experience and even appreciate that sense of competence," noted Mary, "but they're up against so many forces that tell them otherwise. And those are the voices to which they're listening."

Summary and Analysis

Creating a suitable environment for learning in a class characterized by cultural, social, linguistic, and motivational diversity is not an easy task. If the task, more specifically, is one of constructing and sustaining an inclusive and tolerant learning community, then little is accomplished by placing blame upon teacher, student or, collectively, upon a particular group. Instead, efforts must be made to understand how culture and context work to influence the social organization of the classroom and the structure of the learning experience itself.

It has been my intent here to emphasize the importance of contexts constructed by interaction participants in specific teaching and learning events and the manner in which these events are embedded in the broader school and community culture. This emphasis is not meant to discount the real and significant language barriers faced by Millshore's Laotian refugee students, but to heighten awareness of the problematic nature of structuring classroom encounters between socially and culturally disparate students in a small school setting. These encounters have been highlighted for their value in suggesting interactional processes that may be at work in other small schools—though not in the exact configuration found in Millshore.

Competence and Coping Stategies

To communicate competently in classroom encounters, a student must understand the implicit as well as the explicit rules governing participation. The Laotian students in Mary's class appeared uncertain of what social rules or interactional prerogatives they might have violated in the spontaneous banter that prefaced each class or in the bids for attention that punctuated in-class activities. When the focus of class shifted to nonacademic subjects in these instances, Laotian students typically retreated to the solid ground of individual seatwork, a rule-governed academic activity with well-defined boundaries. Confronted with a confusing classroom encounter, they could rely on the structure of a formal assignment to clarify and define their position in relation to their teacher and their classmates. Moreover, they could feel a sense of competence that came from experiencing the basic linkage between purely academic activities and goals.

However effective for the short term, such coping strategies did little to resolve Mary's primary frustration with, in her words, "how to find connections between the social and academic needs of the Laotian and American students in the class." Consider, for illustration, her efforts to structure peer collaboration among the language minority and other academically marginalized students in her class. For the Laotian students, the same cooperative and studious cultural style that gained them teacher support put distance between them and their lower track American classmates. The American students' openly expressed indignation at the reinforcement and higher expectations granted their Laotian classmates translated more broadly into a resentment toward any reminder of

their own ascribed status as academic inferiors within the school.

Such reminders seem especially damaging to students in a rural community where there is little or no insulation from public view. Josh, one of the American students in Mary's class, regarded the small school size that enabled teachers, students, and parents to know each other so well as a liability rather than a benefit:

> Sure, I'd like to be in a bigger school. Everybody knows what everybody's doing here, and once you're in trouble with grades or something, it's the pits . . . like everybody expects you to do bad. It's not worth fighting it. There are a couple of teachers who seem to care a bit, but they're up against the same thing.

Paradoxically, these same American students often assumed the role of "more competent other" in their classroom encounters with the Laotian students—whether directly, through paired interactions mediated by the teacher, or indirectly and unpredictably, through the public dialogue between the teacher and an academically "on" student. However, the Laotian students tended to view such occasions as exacerbating the magnitude of their perceived learner incompetence by highlighting desired knowledge as something located beyond their immediate grasp.

The dilemma faced by Mary Navarro, namely, how to enhance the intellectual value of peer interactions among students, highlights a fundamental issue. Studies have linked language minority student achievement to the development of personal relationships with adults or knowledgeable peers who help these students contextualize academic tasks (Tharp & Gallimore, 1988; Trueba, 1989). The small school, with its small class sizes and opportunities for greater individual attention, seems well suited to the fostering of such relationships. But structure alone is insufficient. Teachers need to model a kind of relationship in which students are encouraged to question each other and from which they can gain appreciation of the positive outcomes of peer interaction. Mary's attempts to structure peer support was a step in this direction. However, transforming these encounters into reciprocal forms of peer assistance requires that the teacher provide more extensive modeling and monitoring, as well as develop a functional awareness of the cultural identities and differences among her students and herself.

Practical application of this awareness requires an acknowledgment by teachers that they are coproducers with their students of the behaviors and conditions that lead to academic success or failure. Contrary assumptions regarding the uniform accessibility of knowledge via teacher and textbook will likely lead to an emphasis upon similarities rather than critical differences among students, while benefiting in particular those students whose cultural and historical backgrounds most closely mirror that of the teacher. Teachers can ease at least some of the literacy and adjustment problems faced by refugees and other linguistic minorities by providing extra time and guidance—to help these students understand how the experiences and behaviors faced by them daily in the home, school, and community have different meanings and values. Providing teachers with more latitude in parcelling curriculum tasks over a period of time can benefit students as they adjust to a new cultural environment (Trueba, Cheng & Ima, 1993). Teachers, too, stand to gain from acquiring an historical perspective and cultural appreciation of their students' families, including an understanding of learning activities that are meaningful from the perspective of the ethnic community.

Contextualizing the Learning Experience

My analysis has proceeded from the assumption that we can better address students' cultural and cognitive needs if we locate our understanding of the learning experience more explicitly within the broader social organization and cultural context of the school and the community (Moll & Diaz, 1987; Tharp & Gallimore, 1988; Trueba, 1988). Accordingly, the parameters set by social and cultural factors are viewed not as background variables but as immediate concerns inextricably linked with each individual's efforts to understand his or her experience in a particular context. Within this framework, academic success or failure is not a personal attribute of any individual, nor a collective characteristic of any class or ethnic group, but a social phenomenon linked to the creation of appropriate conditions for learning (Tharp & Gallimore, 1988; Trueba, 1988).

At Millshore, the classroom experiences of language minority students were framed by institutional arrangements and cultural influences that

constrained both students and teachers. A reduced curriculum to match perceived or identified weaknesses in Laotian students and others categorized as "low ability" or "problem" students reflected a school structure characterized by an inadequate instructional support system and lack of breadth in the instructional program. These latter two items are weaknesses generally associated with rural schools (Stephens & Turner, 1988), but they seem exacerbated when addressing the needs of language minority students within such settings.

Mary's efforts to use peers as educational resources uncovered students' negative perceptions about the worth and attractiveness of those peers, as well as students' negative feelings about their own academic situations. This situation, too, reflected a school structure in which tracking had become the organizational and expectational framework defining the options of teachers and students. More specifically, in the case of a school like Millshore, it suggests that the low track is a poor instructional and social environment for refugee students, who tend to be eager to learn, respectful of teacher authority and direction, and in need of positive interaction with American peers.

In order to faciliate students' adjustments to a new social and cultural environment, teachers themselves need greater assurance of academic success. Efforts to assist refugee and other language minority students in settings like Millshore must be seen as part of systemic initiatives aimed at easing structural constraints upon the development of supportive learning environments and constructive relationships among students and teachers.

Challenge or Burden

Ultimately, the successful accommodation of refugee students and other marginalized groups in rural and small-town communities depends on the ability of local educational leaders to assess the school as part of a larger whole. In Millshore, the response of teachers and students to the changes brought about by local refugee resettlement reflected a more generalized reaction to social and cultural change. The wider community shaped the climate felt in the school and largely determined whether the Laotian students were viewed as a challenge or a burden.

The unfortunate reality of some rural school districts impacted by the unexpected arrival of diverse minority students is one of cultural insensitivity and misunderstanding embedded in the tendency of small communities to resist highly visible forms of change. Policy makers at all levels must recognize this tendency and also acknowledge that teachers and principals alone cannot change the institutional ways of dealing with new immigrants and refugees. Teacher expectations and biases do shape the schooling experiences of refugee students. However, as suggested in the Millshore case, these teacher influences do not appear as critical as community and peer forces, particularly when these latter forces are framed by the tension between social class and ethnic group membership. Given the high visibility and intensity of social interactions commonly found in the small-town school, reform-minded educators would benefit from further comparative research on the role of the peer group in shaping patterns of success or failure among refugee students. In broad terms, field-based research in rural settings must be tailored to provide teachers, administrators, and teacher educators with a better understanding of the role of culture and social class in determining how new immigrants and refugees are perceived, treated, and valued in the local school and community.

References

Caplan, N., Choy, M., & Whitmore, J. (1991). *Children of the boat people.* Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press.

Cazden, C., & Mehan, H. (1989). Principles from sociology and anthropology: Context, code, classroom, and culture. In M. C. Reynolds (Ed.), *Knowledge base for the beginning teacher* (pp. 47-57). Oxford, England: Pergamon Press.

Erickson, F. (1982a). Taught cognitive learning in its immediate environments: A neglected topic in the anthropology of education. *Anthropology and Education Quarterly, 13*(2), 149-180.

Erickson, F. (1982b). Classroom discourse as improvisation: Relations between academic task structures and social participation structures in lessons. In C. Wilkinson (Ed.), *Communication in the classroom,* (pp. 153-181). New York: Academic Press.

Finnan, C. R. (1988). Effects of Southeast Asian refugees on schools and school districts. In H. Trueba and C. Delgado-Gaitan (Eds.), *School and society: Learning content through culture,* (pp. 119-135). New York: Praeger.

Gibson, M. A. (1988). *Accommodation without assimilation: Sikh immigrants in an American high school.* Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Goetz, J. P., & LeCompte, M. D. (1984). *Ethnography and qualitative design in educational research.* New York: Academic Press.

Moll, L. C., & Diaz, S. (1987). Change as the goal of educational research. *Anthropology and Education Quarterly, 18*(4), 300-311.

Office of Refugee Resettlement. (1991). *Report to the Congress: Refugee resettlement program.* Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.

Page, R. (1987). Lower-track classes at a college-preparatory high school: A caricature of educational encounters. In G. Spindler and L. Spindler (Eds.), *Interpretative ethnography of education: At home and abroad,* (pp. 447-472). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Page, R. (1991). *Lower-track classrooms.* New York: Teachers College Press.

Philips, S. (1983). *The invisible culture.* New York: Longman.

Schram, T. (1994). Players along the margin: Diversity and adaptation in a lower-track classroom. In G. Spindler and L. Spindler (Eds.), *Pathways to cultural awareness: Cultural therapy with teachers and students* (pp. 61-91). Newbury Park, CA: Corwin Press.

Schwartz, F. (1981). Supporting or subverting learning: Peer group patterns in four tracked schools. *Anthropology and Education Quarterly, 12*(2), 99-121.

Spradley, J. R. (1979). *The ethnographic interview.* New York: Holt, Rinehart andWinston.

Stephens, E. R., & Turner, W. G. (1988). *Leadership for rural schools.* Washington, DC: American Association of School Administrators.

Tharp, R., & Gallimore, R. (1988). *Rousing minds to life: Teaching, learning, and schooling in social context.* New York: Cambridge University Press.

Trueba, H. (1988). Culturally based explanations of minority students' academic achievement. *Anthropology and Education Quarterly, 19*(3), 270-287.

Trueba, H. (1989). *Raising silent voices: Educating the linguistic minorities for the 21st century.* New York: Harper and Row.

Trueba, H., Jacobs, L., & Kirton, E. (1990). *Cultural conflict and adaptation: The case of Hmong children in American society.* Bristol, PA: Falmer Press.

Trueba, H., Cheng, L. R., & Ima, K. (1993). *Myth or reality: Adaptive strategies of Asian Americans in California.* Bristol, PA: Falmer Press.

Wheelock, A. (1992). *Crossing the tracks: How "untracking" can save America's schools.* New York: The New Press.