Mark F. Goldberg

Portrait of Shirley Brice Heath

Through her studies of "subordinated populations," Shirley Brice Heath has committed herself to fostering appreciation of diverse cultures and understanding how those cultures affect children's learning experiences.

MARK F. GOLDBERG

Few educators can claim the breadth of experience of Shirley Brice Heath. As an anthropologist, linguist, and social historian, she has studied diverse communities in the United States and Latin America and has written on topics ranging from government language policies to the importance of reading bedtime stories to children. She has taught in elementary and secondary schools, as well as at the university level. Audiences on five continents have heard her describe her work, which she approaches with passion and commitment. Her work has influenced many educators who want to know how language acquisition, family practices, community myths, local customs, and public policy influence the way children learn and make life choices in school.

The recipient of the David H. Russell Award for Distinguished Research in language arts and a MacArthur Foundation creativity award, Heath was elected to the National Academy of Education in 1990. She is currently Professor of English and Linguistics at Stanford University, with courtesy appointments in anthropology and education.

A Lifelong Study Unfolds

These exemplary accomplishments belie Heath's humble beginnings in rural southern Virginia and western North Carolina. As she puts it, her early life was "atypical of most people who end up working with language. . . . I did not grow up with a rich literary background." Heath spent much of her early life with her grandmother, who had an 8th grade education, or with a foster mother. Many of Heath's friends were black. She describes herself as someone who "grew up speaking black English with a Southern white, lower-class accent."

A new world opened up to Heath when, in her early teens, she spent a summer in Indiana with her aunt and uncle. "My father's sister married a man who had gone to Harvard Law School, and they were the ones who really gave me a sense of myself." She spent the summer "experiencing books and people who talked about ballet and concerts," and she returned to high school "with the idea to take opportunities, to take risks, to stay out of the standard track."

But Heath's childhood circumstances had left a lasting imprint, giving her the instinct and the impetus to do ethnographic work in low-income areas. She characterizes much of her work as being "focused on the lives, the language, and the cultural backgrounds of minority populations, or what you might call 'subordinated populations.' "

During the late 1950s and early 1960s, Heath worked in Mississippi with poor blacks and in California with migrant workers. In Mississippi, mostly in Biloxi, she worked with some music and art groups, "the rural equivalent of street theater." As a result of her work in southern California, Heath, fluent in Spanish, real-

ized that children of migrant workers were put in special education classes because they couldn't speak English.

In 1962, after interrupting college several times to work at various jobs and having attended five schools, Heath received her A.B. degree from Lynchburg College in Virginia. She graduated with an inchoate understanding that "many poor kids are broken and turn to drugs and alcohol as substitutes for self-esteem."

Heath lived with her aunt and uncle again while doing graduate work at Ball State. After completing her work there, her growing interests in Spanish, Latin American culture, linguistics, anthropology, and English as a second language led her to Columbia University. Her area of concentration was Latin American culture with a focus on anthropology, and she did field work in Mexico and Guatemala. By now, she was married and had two small children. Unwilling to be less than a full-time mother, she took her children to Mexico while she did her field work there. Soon after receiving her doctorate in 1970, she published her first book, *Telling Tongues: Language Policy in Mexico — Colony to Nation*.

Between 1970 and 1980, Heath taught at several southern colleges, got divorced, raised her children, and married her current husband, Charles Ferguson, a Stanford linguist. She also completed field work in the Carolinas for *Ways With Words*, a description of her ethnographic research in the Piedmont area from 1969 to 1978.

Throughout her career, most of Heath's efforts have been "youth related." She has raised such issues as "how the uses of language and the daily habits of valuing and arranging time and space could tell us something about how schools and other institutions that affect young people might work differently." She has also reacted against the powerful assimilationist and behaviorist impulses of the 1950s and 1960s "to shape young people out of their indigenous patterns and habits." By fostering appreciation of different cultures and their language socialization patterns, Heath believed she could offer schools and other institutions options for working with minority populations that would capitalize on the unique backgrounds and talents of these children. Her bedrock belief has been that "we should have schools that acknowledge these kids as resources rather than problems."

When I asked Heath about the language of the lower-class rural children she studied, she responded:

> They do not have baby talk directed at them. They're never asked questions to which the adults already know the answer. In contrast, mainstream middle-class children are constantly asked, 'Where is your nose?' or told, 'Point to daddy.' If a middle-class child pulls on an adult's pant leg, the result is, 'Yes, Susie, what is it?' Susie gets the conversational floor. That just wouldn't happen in a working-class rural family. It's unthinkable.

Yet these working-class children have a wide range of functions of language and can sustain long utterances. They are particularly good at imitation, from the styles of radio voices to those "of the old man who lives down the road when he's sober and when he's drunk." The mainstream child "can tell a story on demand: 'Tell Daddy what you did today, Danny.' "

The mainstream skill, of course, is more valued in school. The poor rural child is perceived as a "nugget of potential that needs love and nurturing to unfold." The middle-class child, also loved, benefits from substantial

"I don't give answers; I search for answers. I have lots of questions, but very few answers to anything."

adult mediation and mentoring, a factor that Heath understands well from her relationship with her own aunt and uncle.

While much of Heath's work is technical — "analysis of syntax, discourse features, genres, hypotheticals, and conditionals" — both she and her results capture the essence of human behavior. More than once when Heath summarized a particular event or made a point, she spoke in the precise accent or dialect of a person she had talked with, revealing in an unaffected way her total immersion in her work.

What Makes a Difference for Urban Youth?

In the mid-1980s, a few years after joining the faculty at Stanford, Heath began studying neighborhood-based organizations in three major U.S. cities. She wanted to know why these organizations had success with many disadvantaged youngsters. She had begun her research with the question, "If we were to look at a sampling of kids from desperate circumstances who 'made it,' what would we find as the one or two factors that made a difference?" In every case, she discovered, there was a mentor, an individual who said, "You've got some great potential, and I'll help you." Often,

she found, the mentor was connected to a local youth organization. The second factor she identified was "sustained involvement with some sort of neighborhood-based organization beyond the family that gave the young person a wider set of models."

For many urban youth, the neighborhood organizations are places to do theater, to box, to play basketball — short-term, engaging activities. The surrounding neighborhood is full of peril, but these organizations are what Heath calls "fortresses against the rest of the world . . . and within them, kids are safe."

Neighborhood-based organizations are not only safe, but also reassuring. Rules are very few: "No drugs" or "Leave this place the way you found it." The list of rooms tells youngsters exactly the choices they have: sculpture, boxing, pool, library, homework, drama. Uplifting mottos adorn the walls. Heath points out that "many of the leaders of these groups are kids themselves — just a little older" and experienced in the activity.

Some of Heath's work in neighborhood organizations has benefited young people in unexpected ways. For example, some of the youngsters in the organizations she is studying showed an interest in Heath's field notes, and a few have even volunteered to be junior ethnographers. "We do a lot of orienting of these youngsters to the ethics of recording the language of others. We make sure they know we are not interested in recording drug deals or plans for robberies. We just want to know what kind of language they use when they get together and talk about what happens." Some of the junior ethnographers liked what they were doing enough to transfer that enthusiasm to school and then to go on to college.

When I questioned Heath about the role of teachers and schools in low-income neighborhoods, she answered cautiously and thoughtfully, saying there are some fine teachers, but for many kids, school is not the central answer. Most of these kids are absolutely convinced that they can't learn in school and "know that the work world is the only real world." Teachers often

> cannot overcome the generally repressive ethos of schools for these kids. Many of them go to schools in the worst part of town; they're in schools that are not always able to recruit the teachers of greatest imagination — and if they do, there are very repressive environments for these teachers, very limited resources. The kids and the teachers struggle against a lot of odds. Very few of the kids connect schools to their lives.

Many of Heath's findings published nearly a decade ago in *Ways with Words* have recently leached into the mainstream of educational thought. For example, Heath learned that "the work world demands that you display knowledge nonverbally, that you display in an array of ways what you know, and that you have some strong potential for self-assessment." She found that "working in teams is valuable" and that "learning from mistakes, [though] not very valued in schools, is highly valued in the workplace."

Heath also understands the importance of schools and families working together. She is aware, however, that no single or monolithic solution will work; language patterns, racial and ethnic differences, family practices, economic disparities, and dozens of other issues come into play.

Discovering Questions, Seeking Answers

While Heath's influence has been considerable among people who know her work, she asserts that she is not "a problem solver for education" and says she is "repelled by university people coming to tell those of us who have spent so many hours in the classroom what to do with our kids."

Clearly there will never be a Shirley Brice Heath method. She sees life as far too complex for that and is more interested in working with teachers to help them find ways of discovering questions, patterns, and answers that might fit their idiosyncratic circumstances. "I don't give answers; I search for answers. I have lots of questions, but very few answers to anything."

Heath's passion for her work continues unabated. Her interests range from the role of voice in American literature to the continuing work on youth organizations. Her commitment to low-income children is now centered on college training:

> One of our best hopes for increasing and enhancing the opportunity for children of subordinated cultures and languages is to have more and more people in colleges who have the sensibility and the teaching experience necessary to understand minority children. They also must be people who are willing to take the relevant social science and linguistic and historical knowledge and bring that to bear on thinking about how institutions and policy work.

Heath's amalgam of scholarship, research, perseverance, optimism, and sheer hard work, buttressed by the belief that every dedicated mentor can make an important difference, keeps her work alive and influential. □

Mark F. Goldberg is an administrator, Shoreham-Wading River Central School District, Route 25A, Shoreham, New York 11786.