

Learning as Cultural Practice: How Children Learn in a Mexican Mazahua Community, by Mariëtte de Haan, Amsterdam: Thela Thelis, 1999, 314 pp., \$33.00 (paper).

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About a decade ago, a friend and colleague of mine returned from Togo, a West African country on the Gulf of Guinea, where he taught mathematics for 9 months in a local university. He told me that the native people of Togo do not care about their kids and do not teach them anything. The kids grow like wild grass under the sky and are left to their own devices. My friend gave me a long list of what Togo adults and children do that does not, from his point of view, constitute guidance. Knowing (in an abstract way) the complexity of human practices in any given society, I could not believe his conclusion about the Togo people; however, I felt also that in Togo he probably faced a very interesting and real phenomenon.

Dutch researcher Mariëtte de Haan's book about how Mexican Mazahua Indian children learn in their community and in school helps me to understand the phenomenon that my friend faced in Togo. It is not because I believe that the way adults provide guidance and how children learn in Togo and Mazahua communities are necessarily similar, but rather because, to a high degree, this phenomenon centers around people from Western middle-class communities to which my friend and I belong. To be exact, it is about relations between the communities. For a long time, Western educators and psychological researchers have believed that "guidance is guidance" and "learning is learning" — they are universal and everywhere. Wood, Bruner, and Ross's (1976) pioneering research on adult guidance described important principles of adult engagement with children in adult-child tutoring sessions that they called "scaffolding." Rogoff (1990) presented these principles of scaffolding in the following way:

- Recruiting the child's interest in the task as it is defined by the tutor;
- Reducing the number of steps required to solve a problem by simplifying the task, so that the learner can manage components of the process and recognize when a fit with task requirements is achieved;
- Maintaining the pursuit of the goal through motivation of the child and direction of the activity;
- Marking critical features of discrepancies between what a child has produced and the ideal solution;
- Controlling frustration and risk in problem solving; and
- Demonstrating an idealized version of the act to be performed.

It appears that my friend could not find these principles in the interactions between Togo adults and children and, thus, he concluded that there was no guidance. Similarly, in de Haan's research, a non-Mazahua, Mestizo informant reported that Mazahua parents are "not interested in their children ... and do not educate" them (p. 74).

de Haan rejects the notion of guidance as a universal category and argued that guidance (and learning) is shaped by culture. In other words, guidance takes many diverse forms and this diversity can be understood only within historical and cultural practices, values, beliefs, and systems of relations. According to de Haan, each cultural practice creates its own forms of guidance and learning that are shaped by that culture. de Haan finds her conceptual roots in the family of sociocultural approaches exemplified by the work of Vygotsky, Cole, Wertsch, Lave, Rogoff, Valsiner, Heath, Engström, Ochs, Wenger, and many others.

Her book progresses from a theoretical discussion of *guidance/learning* as cultural practice to a historical and anthropological outline of Mazahua Indian communities and their relations with the mainstream Mexican society. de Haan turns to a description of her own research on guidance and learning in a Mexican Mazahua community based on two visits several months long. The research moves from ethnographic observations of children–adult interaction in everyday practices and interviews with adults about how they provide guidance and how Mazahua children learn, to videotaped observations of adult–child interactions in structured experimental situations designed by de Haan. Finally, the author presents a quantitative statistical analysis of videotaped sessions to test patterns emerging from observations of how Mazahua parents and schoolteachers engaged with elementary schoolchildren in three practice-based tasks structured by the experimenter: (a) a construction task of building a little shelter over a market stall ("puesto"); (b) a math task of extending a "puesto" to fit a certain number and sizes of products; and (c) a math task of calculating the profit from selling toy cassette recorders (the task was not analyzed in the book).

The research methodology presented in the book involves interesting progression from historical analysis, to anthropological observations of everyday activities, to interviews with parents about their guiding practices, to ethnography of psychological experiments, and, finally, to a quantitative statistical analysis of observed patterns. This progression from "thick" qualitative descriptions (Geertz, 1973) to statistical tests of quantitative patterns that emerged from qualitative research continues a new tradition of a qualitative-quantitative methodological hybrid in sociocultural psychological research (see Rogoff, Mistry, Goncú, & Mosier, 1993, for more discussion of this methodology). However, my personal communication with the author (March, 2000) reveals that the methodology of "first qualitative, than quantitative" analyses reflected in the book's organization is an oversimplification because both types of analyses informed each other and were conducted in an overlapping rather than sequential manner. What is especially innovative in de Haan's methodology, in my view, is that she focuses on holistic patterns of adult-child engagement rather than on some discrete aspects of guidance.

In her discussion of adult guidance and child learning in adult–child engagement, de Haan focuses on issues of whether and how tasks in which the children are involved are structured by the adults, how the adults and children deal with adult–child asymmetry in competence and division of labor, and whether and how they manage the risk of task performance resulting in a lack of children's competence. Based on this rich and diverse data and analysis, de Haan describes Mazahua adult–child engagement as I have abstracted next.

PRINCIPLES OF MAZAHUA ADULTS' ENGAGEMENT WITH
CHILDREN (IN COMPARISON WITH WESTERN MIDDLE-CLASS
ADULT-CHILD ENGAGEMENT)

In the Mazahua community, children are much less the center of adults' attention than in Western middle-class communities. For instance, de Haan provides very compelling examples of how parents were "ignoring" their tired toddler and her distress while walking in a maize field (and where the author could not help herself but tried to actively engage, help, and soothe the toddler). Learning is viewed and organized not as a separate activity but as an aspect of meaningful action and productive work. The activity rhythm, structure, and functions remain intact when children are involved. Metaphorically speaking, a child is "thrown" into an activity and is expected to do as much as he or she can. Lave and Wenger's (1991) notion of "legitimate peripheral participation" can be especially handy here. Adults' understanding of making children learn is to make them work. Children's learning occurs as the children often volunteer and adults invite them into a "real-life" situations involving meaningful activities with outcomes pragmatically important for other people (e.g., helping the adults in their productive work), and as the children are confronted with the demands of the situation.

Children are expected to take the initiative and observe adults as they all engage in the same activity. If the children do not develop that attitude, adults do not have at their disposal means to "repair" this situation. Disciplinary measures are considered highly improper. Learning and participation is expected through children's free will. Children do not need an explicit instruction to be motivated to participate. When adults and children are in conflict about children's participation, the adults do not force the children to participate. Children are left to their own devices while adults provide peripheral ("passive") support of children's initiatives by coordinating their own activity with children's efforts. Adults assist children with all kinds of directions aimed at the child's initiative and demand. Adults often try to maximize the children's responsibility for the activity by giving them opportunities to engage in more difficult tasks when they request it.

Children are often expected to make a "breakthrough" in the activity and to (re)negotiate boundaries of responsibilities and of division of labor. Adults often wait for children to volunteer to take more responsibility for the activity. By helping adults with their activities, children develop their motivation and interest in how things work. Children are often confronted with the boundaries of their knowledge and their incompetence through adults' (and older siblings') teasing. Adults are more tolerant to danger and risk in the tasks in which children are involved than Western adults. However, Mazahua adults do monitor the risk of children's engagement in the activity for the outcomes of the activity by limiting tasks available for the children. Children are challenged (often via teasing and the situation itself) to gain their missing knowledge as soon as possible. Children are viewed as full participants in the activity, and are not excused for being novices. Adults are concerned with children's engagement, zone of comfort, and interest in the activity. When children make mistakes, adults offer them new opportunities and encourage them to take new initiatives (rather than focusing on mistakes) that probably leads to minimizing children's frustration. Children are considered as fully and truly responsible for the tasks that they are given or have taken up. When they commit an error, adults often are irritated and do not excuse the child because she is only learning. On the other hand, their level of competence is taken into account, for example, in the selection of tasks, in the kind of help they receive when they perform new tasks, and so on.

Adults have a range of strategies to manage risks resulting from children's participation: acceptance of loss, distant monitoring, close monitoring, confronting the children with errors, and correcting the errors by themselves. When children are engaged in the activities, adults have to adjust their actions to coordinate with the children's actions, to monitor and manage risks resulting in the children's participation, to divide their attention between the activity and the children's actions, to stop or slow down the activity instruct the children or wait for them. and to provide the children with observation opportunities.

de Haan convincingly argues that informal learning should not be equated with absence of adult guidance. She shows that it is not true that in informal learning situations children are only guided by the activity. As in the case of Mazahua adult-child engagement, the role of adults in informal learning is not limited to accepting children as legitimate participants in the activity and expecting that the children will learn the activity "by osmosis." de Haan demonstrates that Mazahua parents do change their actions to promote children's participation and learning and they do assume a special role in the activity, although this role is more flexible and less obvious as in scaffolding-like guidance. In the case of the Mazahuas, learning is always an inherent part of a meaningful cultural activity and that children always learn through assuming "real" responsibility. Mazahua adults do not free their children from the responsibility for the activity outcomes to make them learn. as it often occurs in mainstream schools.

PRINCIPLES OF SCHOOLTEACHERS' ENGAGEMENT WITH MAZAHUA CHILDREN (IN COMPARISON WITH MAZAHUA PARENT-CHILDREN ENGAGEMENT)

de Haan also contributes to description and understanding of Western guidance (i.e., scaffolding), organized by the teachers in the Mazahua community, by contrasting it with Mazahua traditional guidance provided by Mazahua parents. This comparison of Western and traditional Mazahua guidance helps to look at Western guidance more from an outsiders' perspective.

In her research of Mazahua schoolteachers, de Haan finds many examples of school-like guidance or scaffolding described by other researchers, such as structuring the task in a sequence of challenges, focusing on providing "the right amount of guidance," distancing from the immediate context, asking known questions, motivating students to perform the task, triadic discourse, alternating attention pattern, and so on (Heath, 1983; Mehan, 1979; Newman, Cole, & Griffin, 1989; Rogoff, 1990; Wood et al., 1976). Among other aspects, the author contributes to the work on scaffolding by stressing that scaffolding involves two separate planes of the activity: the teaching plane and the task performance plane, where task performance is fully subordinated to teaching. This seems to be a very important feature of scaffolding that shapes many other aspects of this type of guidance.

In such guidance, learning is viewed as a special activity that is separate from the targeted activity to be learned. This creates two planes of teacher-student activity: (a) the *teaching* plane aimed at the student's learning, that is, evoking the student's skills, knowledge, understanding, and actions desired by the teacher and (b) the *task performance* plane, that is, the tasks carrying the crucial elements abstracted and purified from the targeted activity to be learned. Teaching is superordinated to task performance. The sequence, logic, and continuity of task performance are often "sacrificed" to orient the student or assess the student's knowledge and understanding: "the

task performance is picked up, dropped, repeated, slowed down, whenever it is necessary for the sake of learning" (p. 162).

Task performance is "nested" in teaching and is seen as a means rather than an end in itself. Events are organized by the teacher around the students' understanding (as inferred by the teacher) and not around task performance; task performance becomes relevant only for the teachers' evaluation of the child's understanding and learning. The teachers create separate spaces of the activity that are used to orient, inform, and correct the student. At the beginning of the activity, the teachers dedicate time to "prepare" the students for the task by motivating and convincing them to become participants, introducing an imaginary situation of task performance (e.g., "imagine that you are a saleswoman and these are your goods and it is going to rain"), informing about future task performance, and defining their roles in it. Often the teachers provide the students information in advance, which is clearly separated from the task performance itself.

Task performance is highly prestructured and controlled by the teachers. To manage the students' incompetence and possible frustration with the task, the teachers divide the task into smaller task units matching the students' competencies and possible challenges (and errors), as anticipated by the teachers, and verbally orient the students to each task unit. To minimize the risk of students' failure in the task, the teachers try to restrict students' actions by asking them to follow a task structure highly controlled by the teachers and to create *safe spaces* for students' experimentation without affecting the task performance. Within the safe spaces, the teachers try not to interfere much in the students' actions; however, they provide orientation when the task is not performed well. The teachers often ask known questions and wait a long time for the students' answer (even 10 sec.) while the students seem to become very embarrassed during the time when they do not know the answer. The students are extensively confronted with what went wrong by the teachers, who try to make the students understand the nature of their mistakes. The teachers often give the students another opportunity to perform the task as restructured to match their competence.

Errors are seen to be relevant to the students' learning and not to the task itself. The teachers often use both preventive and "repair" strategies in which the task is interrupted or even rearranged (e.g., by dividing it on subtasks) to deal with students' potential or actual mistakes. The students' errors are often seen as a consequence of the teacher's error (i.e., not estimating the students' level of knowledge and understanding correctly). Thus, errors inform the teachers about the students' capacities and how they should restructure the task to provide better guidance. Errors also inform how well the teachers are doing in their teaching. It is expected that if the students are doing well, then the task is performed without errors.

The teachers constantly alternate the responsibility for the task between themselves and the students. The students have momentary responsibility, which is clearly controlled, defined, and mediated by the teachers. The students' responsibility in the activity is not so much to produce some task outcomes pragmatically important for other people, but rather to expose their own skills and understanding for the teachers to guide them. The teachers' guidance is "a strategic plan" for the teachers to focus the students on some aspects of the task performance. Division of labor and the character of roles in the activity are static, hierarchical, and predesigned by the teachers. The students are not expected to provide information spontaneously but to wait until the teachers ask for it. The information is evaluated by the teachers who express their approval or disapproval. Students' attempts to initiate contributions spontaneously without the teachers' sanctions are either ignored or incorporated into the overall system of the teachers' control.

The teachers' attention is completely on the students' performance. Their own contributions to the activity are often on a less strategic part of the task to keep the students "moving on." The students are always under the teachers' control and have to switch between being an active performer and an attentive listener on the teachers' request. At the end, the teachers distance themselves from the task by constantly evaluating the students' performance.

CULTURE AS HYBRID

Like some other researchers who studied guidance and learning in traditional communities (see Rogoff et al., 1993), the author found that some Mazahua parents organized their guidance in ways more similar to teachers than other parents. However, de Haan links this more to those parents' systematically helping children with homework rather than with the parents' level of formal education. Although these two factors could be expected to be related, no effect of parents' level of education was found in her research. The phenomenon probably can be explained by the fact that how people use their formal education is more important than being formally educated by itself.

In addition, de Haan discovers guidance hybrids rather than just a simple mixture of these two types of guidance. For example, "homework parents" asked children known-answer questions; however, they did not leave the children "trying by themselves" without providing an answer for as long as the teachers did. The function of these known-answer questions was apparently different than that used by the teachers in scaffolding because the parents' known-answer questions seemed to be aimed at triggering information from either of the participants (i.e., the parent and the child) and not so much to examine the children's knowledge as it is done in scaffolding.

de Haan emphasizes diversity in the forms of guidance that Mazahua parents demonstrate and in the forms of learning in which Mazahua children are involved. When the author asked a Mazahua adult to teach her an important activity unknown to her (e.g., how to build a house), he explained and showed his "oficio" (i.e., a traditional skill or activity) to her (e.g., "Then you spread everything out, that is 'adobe' (clay). To dry it well, it's forty-eight hours. To place them you need mud so that it will hold. When you have reached a level of three meters of height ... and the other two and a half.") After the Mazahua man finished replying to her questions, the author asked him if she could build houses now. He replied, "That depends on you" (p. 73). The "oficio" presented to the foreigner sounds more like an account of the activity, which is very different from how Mazahua parents guide their children or how teachers teach in school. Mazahua adults demonstrate a variety of teaching "registers" depending on the context and identity of the learner.

I see at least three important directions for future research, besides continuing to document different cultural patterns of guidance and adult-child engagement. First, it is important to situate cultural patterns of guidance and engagement within a broader system of cultural practices and relations. It remains unclear where scaffolding/schooling and other forms of guidance "come from" and how they "fit" other practices. Second, it seems to be important to extend the analysis of scaffolding beyond adult-child dyads and focus on traditional schooling where this type of guidance leads to production of systematic failure and success in students (in comparison to near 100% success in Mazahua informal learning to incorporate their children in socially valuable practices as described by de Haan). This is especially important if scaffolding originates in traditional schooling as many scholars suspect. Third, learning is not only about participation in an activity but also about participation in a community. What implications for children's identities and social rela-

tions does their participation have in one or another type of guidance? These are questions for future research that will lead us beyond acknowledging cultural differences.

I think that de Haan's book is a "must read" for anyone who is interested in guidance and learning. It challenges our assumptions of what is guidance, what is good guidance, and whether guidance can be culture free. The book also pushes forward sociocultural theory on guidance by challenging attempts to build universal principles of guidance.

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