

The Texas Children's Folklore Project

A Retrospective

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In this introductory essay, I present an overview of the historical and institutional context, the motivating ideology, the methodological framework, and the research foci of the Texas Children's Folklore Project, conducted from 1973-1976 by a team of faculty and graduate students from the University of Texas under the auspices of the Southwest Educational Laboratory.

From 1973-1976, I directed a research project on children's folklore under the auspices of the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL) in Austin, Texas. The project yielded a number of publications that suggest the principal frames of reference that guided our work¹ but not necessarily the motivating factors that led me to undertake it in the first place or the elements of time, place, and organization that gave it shape and direction. This essay, then, is intended to fill some of those gaps, though at a remove of more than 50 years and in the absence of concrete records that would allow for more detail and precision. Those files, alas, fell by the wayside in the course of several moves and office clear-outs, but memory, conversations with surviving participants, and the published record bring back at least the basic contours of the enterprise.

The politics of education in Texas in the early 1970s

Texas, like other southern states with a long history of segregation, was conspicuously resistant to the kinds of efforts at integration mandated by *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954 and the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Nevertheless, notwithstanding the foot-dragging of top-level administrative officials, there were a few

staunch staff members at the Texas Education Agency (TEA) who made efforts, beginning in the late 1960s, to respond constructively to the need for redressive and compensatory measures to overcome the deeply detrimental effects of a century of segregated schooling.

One such effort, organized by Mary Galvan of TEA in partnership with Rudolph Troike, a linguist in the University of Texas English department, was the East Texas Dialect Project, launched in 1967 with funding from the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), signed into law in 1965 by President Lyndon Johnson. Among its wide-ranging provisions, the law provided federal grants to state educational agencies to improve the quality of elementary and secondary education. The substantive focus of the project in East Texas was "To study the language patterns which exist in Texas, particularly the phonology and syntax which have most bearing on learning" (Galvan and Troike 1972[1969]:298). A critical turning point in the project's development was the discovery by fieldworkers of "extralinguistic" factors (i.e., factors beyond the initial focal elements of phonology and syntax) that seemed to have significant implications for understanding language use on the part of African American children. Specifically—perhaps unexpectedly—the fieldworkers began to amass a corpus of children's folklore forms—"rope-skipping rhymes, game songs, and narrative accounts" as well as "verbal contests"—the dynamics of which could not be grasped satisfactorily in formal linguistic terms. As recounted by the principal investigators, "About this point, the project was fortunate in acquiring the consultative services of another University of Texas staff member, a folklorist with a specialty in Negro culture, whose role was to explain many cultural patterns of behavior to staff members. His contribution became larger as time passed and is at present [i.e., in 1969] equally important as the linguists'" (Galvan and Troike 1972:299). That folklorist was Roger Abrahams, Troike's colleague in UT's English department. African American children's

folklore was a significant component of Roger's dissertation research in South Philadelphia (Abrahams 1962) and at the time he joined the East Texas Dialect Project team he was at work on *Jump-rope Rhymes: A Dictionary* (1969). Roger's contribution, and that of Américo Paredes who joined up in the next phase of the project as it expanded into Mexican American South Texas, cemented the place of folklorists in subsequent compensatory efforts on the part of TEA. All this is to say that just as the UT Folklore Program was getting fully under way with the establishment of the Center for Intercultural Studies in Folklore and Oral History ("the Folklore Center") in the Spring of 1968 (see Bauman 2020), children's folklore was becoming a significant component of the intellectual environment for UT folklorists.

In the aftermath of the East Texas Dialect Project, TEA established a consulting committee, including Roger and Américo, to assist in the development of intercultural education programs but the politics of culture in Texas and the continued foot-dragging on the part of top-level leadership at TEA precluded any real progress. Pressures increased significantly, though, in 1971 with the handing down of Civil Action 5281, a federal court order issued in response to a lawsuit challenging continued efforts to circumvent integration (The School Desegregation in Texas Policy Research Project 1982). Sweeping in its scope, encompassing the entire state, the order contained multiple provisions addressing demographic and administrative problems and policies, but one section addressed "Curriculum and Compensatory Education" and placed TEA in charge of monitoring and enforcement. This responsibility provided an impetus to elevating the consulting committee, now under the rubric of the "Confluence of Texan Cultures," with a charge that included "the provision of programs to compensate students for the ill effects of previously segregated schools" and "the development of a statewide design to educate the disadvantaged."² Membership on the committee, as it turned out, was not without its frustrations as efforts to slow-walk the process within

TEA and to circumvent its implementation out in the state at large persisted, but for the time being, into the mid-1970s, children's folklore remained of at least professed interest to the agency as a resource that would serve the interest of compensatory program development and acknowledge the cultural heritage of "the disadvantaged."

It is important to recall that this period in the late '60s and early '70s was the heyday of deprivationist ideologies on the part of educationists and psychologist—even liberal ones—concerning the verbal and cognitive abilities of working class and minority kids and their low performance in the nation's public schools. In the pithy critical summary offered by Joan Baratz,

The educators were the first to contribute a statement about the language difficulties of these children, a statement that amounted to the fact that these children were virtually verbally destitute—i.e., they couldn't talk and if they did, their speech was deviant and filled with "errors." The next group to get into the fray—the psychologists—reconfirmed initially that the children didn't talk, and then added the sophisticated wrinkle that if they did talk, their speech was such that it was a deterrent to cognitive growth. [Baratz 1969:87]

To folklorists even superficially familiar with the kinds of verbal, cognitive, and interactional skills—even virtuosity—that these very children were able to display out in the schoolyard, the neighborhood, and the home, these deprivationist portraits simply did not ring true. The interventionist efforts that those of us at UT and our colleagues elsewhere sought to bring to bear were based on our understanding that what kids knew and could do with regard to language and the associated skills demonstrated in their play activities would provide a critical corrective to notions of verbal and cognitive disability and a basis for enriching educational programs that would compensate for and redress the damaging effects of segregated schooling.

At the same time that Roger and Américo were engaged in these state-focused efforts, I became involved in similarly motivated project sponsored by the American Speech and Hearing Association (ASHA), the national professional organization of speech pathologists and audiologists in the U.S. Collegial connections with faculty and graduate students in Speech and Hearing at UT drew me into a consultative role with ASHA as it too attempted to come to terms with linguistic and cultural diversity and overcome a deeply entrenched bias toward monoglot standard English and the ideologies that sustained it. My efforts, in a 1970 workshop and subsequent article (Bauman 1970), were directed at suggesting the productiveness of a relativist, ethnographic perspective on language as a critical corrective to the ethnocentric biases that prevailed among the vast majority of speech pathologists and speech therapists engaged with school-aged children. In particular, I advocated for the value of children's folklore as a vantage point on what minority children knew and could do with language.

The Texas Children's Folklore Project

The foregoing overview is prologue, but it suggests why I should have been receptive when Bob Randall came to see me as director of the UT Folklore Center, sometime in the fall of 1972. Bob was the head of the Early Childhood Program at the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL), one of a network of research and development centers and regional educational laboratories authorized in 1965 under Title VI of the ESEA, the same agency that funded the East Texas Dialect Project, and subsequently transferred to the newly created National Institute of Education (NIE) in 1972. The Early Childhood Program was charged with research and program development for children in kindergarten through third grade, roughly, 5-9 years old. Bob's own interests centered on informal learning, that is, learning that takes place

primarily outside or in the margins of formal educational institutions and without formal instruction. Children's folklore was on Texas educators' radar by this time and Bob wanted to explore with me the possibility that SEDL might sponsor a research project in the area with the potential to serve a basis for educational programs that built on the verbal, cognitive, and interactional energies and strengths of cultural forms that were child-initiated and directed and pleasurable to the participants. Moreover, given that the children's folklore forms were rooted in their own communities, they might provide a mechanism for the kids to work out their own adaptations to multiculturalism in newly integrated schools. The outcome of our conversation was that I agreed to direct the project that Bob envisioned under the auspices of SEDL. For me, the venture was multiply appealing: it was an opportunity to put my money where my mouth was, doing primary research that was at the same time oriented to important applied ends and it was a way to support UT graduate students and get them involved in fieldwork that was socially engaged, motivated at least in part by real world social problems.

During the spring of 1973, SEDL administrators and I worked out the arrangements and launched the project. I would teach a graduate course on children's folklore that would serve as a venue for recruiting and training potential fieldworkers as well as exploring foci for research that would suit their interests and those of the overall project and include kids from the three predominant ethnic groups in Texas: African American, Anglo American, and Mexican American. During the academic year of 1973-74, I would take a leave of absence from UT to work full time on the project. Our responsibility was primary research, defined in scholarly terms. SEDL would handle all the bureaucratic work, mediate between us and NIE, provide leads to Austin-area schools that would allow us to work with their kids, and do the work of adapting our findings to school-oriented programs when the time came. Altogether, seven UT

graduate students worked on the project: Meg Brady, Rosalind Eckhardt, John McDowell, Andrea Meditch, Danielle Roemer, Beverly Stoeltje, and Dorothy Stroman. Meg and Beverly were experienced teachers, returned to UT as doctoral students in folklore and Beverly had kids of her own, which enhanced her participation in the project. As the project developed, sollicitational routines (riddles, knock-knock jokes, catches), ring games, line plays, and handclaps emerged as the principal substantive foci of our research.

Project guidelines and research foci

The guidelines for project research were shaped by the conceptual and methodological principles of the ethnography of speaking, then entering what amounted to the second major phase of its development. Following on the programmatic phase of the 1960s, a cadre of young researchers had carried the approach into the field as a framework for their own primary research and by the early 1970s they were ready to report on the results of their efforts. At the time of my involvement in the TCFP, I was engaged, with Joel Sherzer, in the organization, conduct, and aftermath of the Conference on the Ethnography of Speaking, held at UT in April of 1972 to bring these researchers together and followed by the publication of *Explorations in the Ethnography of Speaking* (Bauman and Sherzer 1974) and a review essay of the field (Bauman and Sherzer 1975). At the same time, in a related effort, I was engaged in formulating a concept of performance as a display of virtuosic skill and efficacy, presented initially in the *American Anthropologist* in 1975 and in expanded form in the book version of *Verbal Art as Performance* (Bauman 1975, 1977).

There are abundant bodies of literature on the ethnography of speaking and performance so there is no need to recapitulate their founding principles and subsequent development here. A few key points may be useful, however. First, the

notion of performance was central to the TCFP in two fundamental senses, both rooted in the ethnography of speaking: (a) performance as *practice*, that is, the social use of communicative forms in the conduct of social life, with a focus on acts, events, participant roles and structures, emergent outcomes; (b) performance in the more marked sense of *virtuosic display*, especially important as a critical corrective to deprivationist models. Second, our focus was developmental, attentive to the acquisition of competence in the use of the folklore forms in the children's repertoires. How did children acquire and manifest the knowledge and ability to use these forms in socially appropriate and intelligible ways? This concern required that we record and analyze what amounted to incompetent as well as fully competent attempts to engage in riddling or perform handclaps as novice performers tried them out on the way to being able to accomplish and evaluate fully competent performances and ultimately to attain reflexive awareness of how the various forms are made, used, evaluated, and even, perhaps, parodied or subverted in inversive counterplay. The standard of social appropriateness that guided our work was child-centered: if participants judged and responded to a performance as skillful, enjoyable, and engaging, it was socially appropriate, even if, by strict adult or school-centric terms it was obscene, scatological, or otherwise transgressive. Third, again consistent with the charter of the ethnography of speaking, our assumption was that engagement in children's folklore was cross-culturally variable and to be discovered ethnographically. Thus, as noted earlier, we built into our research protocol fieldwork with children from all three of the major ethnic groups in Texas, Anglo American, African American, Mexican American. Finally, in addition to variation by age and ethnicity, we were attentive to gender variation in repertoire, participation, and development.

Outcomes

It's difficult to know whether or to what extent the research findings produced by the TCFP made their way into early elementary education. By the terms of our arrangement with SEDL, we submitted our materials and reports to them and they were to take over from there in developing educational programs based on what we provided. I do recall a mockup of a booklet of riddles drawn from our corpus, but I'm unsure whether it ever found a publisher or made its way into schools. The lab did support the production of two brief books, one consisting of essays by Meg and Rosalind on African American girls' participation in a variety of play forms, at times in interaction with their Anglo and Mexican American classmates (Brady and Eckhardt 1975), and one by Beverly on handclaps (Stoeltje 1978). Both works combined scholarly documentation and analysis with teacher-oriented explication and feedback to the authors indicates that some teachers, at least, found the works interesting and useful. Just how they were used, who knows? I need hardly say that the lab people paid no attention to the transgressive materials that we collected. Some were even a tad suspicious of data that suggested that children manipulated forms like counting-out rhymes or engaged in inversive clowning against the grain of orderly performances considering that those materials somehow compromised the mainstream ideology of childhood innocence.

For the graduate-student researchers who worked on the project, there were a number of clear payoffs, even beyond the financial support they received for their work. Several went on to do further research on children's folklore. Danielle and John produced Ph.D. dissertations based on the research they carried out under the auspices of the project (McDowell 1975; Roemer 1977). Meg extended her engagement with children's folklore in her subsequent dissertation research and book on Navajo children's Skinwalker stories (Brady 1984). Danielle, John, Meg, and Beverly all went on to teach courses devoted to children's folklore or including a significant component of

children's folklore in more general courses, such as American folklore. And for all participants, I believe, the project offered a focused initiation into the world of socially engaged scholarship. I know that for all those participants who went on to teach, bringing that engaged stance into the classroom had a multiplier effect. Over the decades since the early '70s, the work of the TCFP colored the educational experience of a lot of college students. We can hope that it made a difference in their understanding of the strengths and challenges of cultural and linguistic diversity and what they might offer to a humane multicultural society. In the end, I believe, no one who has considered closely the semantic intricacy of a children's riddling session can doubt their cognitive abilities; no one who has analyzed the poetic and kinesic intricacy of a handclap session can doubt their capacity for verbal virtuosity; no one who has observed the structural acuity of a schoolyard clown in his inversive parody of a line play, can question his capacity for reflexive awareness; and no one who has witnessed the social finesse of a girl leading a ring play can deny her rhetorical skill and effectiveness in managing complex interaction.

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¹ See the TCFP bibliography (page 147) in this issue.

² L. Harlan Ford to Américo Paredes, 9/17/71. Américo Paredes Papers, Nettie Lee Benson Library, University of Texas, Austin.