CHAPTER 1

School in the City

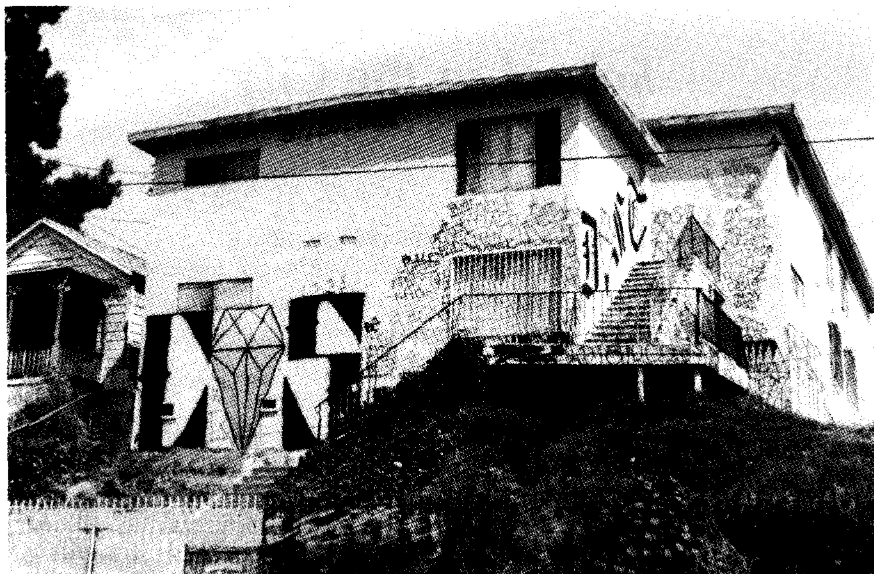
A new school. . . . It will destroy this community.
—William J. Mavropoulos,
a spokesman for Grupo Latino Echo Park

One does not expect to find a high school in downtown Los Angeles. Daily, thousands of cars are deposited among the tall buildings and swiftly funneled into underground parking, their drivers whisked up interior elevators to work. At the end of the day, well-engineered entrance ramps carry the cars back to homeward-bound freeways. These cars crisscross each other, making elaborate and split-second negotiations, but interaction between people, it seems, is an indoor activity here. The vision of high school students carrying backpacks, walking and talking in groups, seems incongruous with this urban efficiency.

Should one turn off of Hill Street, and head west under the 110 freeway, there is a scene equally incongruous with traditional schooling. Much of this neighborhood was evacuated and leveled years ago for the ambitious and ill-fated "Central City West" project that was to include public housing, a new high school, and a shopping area. Today, a large barren hill, visible from the freeway, forms a buffer zone between the urban poor and the swift pace of downtown traffic. A deteriorating cement wall holds part of the hill together and has been tagged with graffiti from the local gang, "Diamond Street." A corner of the field houses have become an ad hoc outdoor living room—a lounge chair, bent into permanent recline, drained twelve packs, old car mats. Nearby, a dirt alley hides a recently stripped car. Atop a hill, centering the neighborhood, a small and feeble oil rig slowly pumps and clinks. One might notice now the acrid sulfuric odor in the air.

Around the corner stands evidence of a life shared by some of the young men and women of this neighborhood, a life that lures them away from school. An aqua blue house, only officially evacuated, towers above the street, marked with the Diamond Street gang roll call and a silver Diamond Street logo painted a full story tall (Figure 1.1). The foundation wall of the burnt-out garage, painted deep red, lists another set of names under the letters "R.I.P": those gang members who have died "for the neighborhood." On the other side of the neighborhood, beneath another wide, barren hill, graffiti taggers congregate at Belmont

FIGURE 1.1: Diamond Street House with Gang Roll Call.



Tunnel, a relic of L.A.'s extinct public rail system, a former link to downtown (Figure 1.2). This space has now become a landmark, well-known and oft-cited in literature on the L.A. underground art scene (cf., Davis, 1992; Martinez, 1993). It provides thousands of square feet of cement wall for graffiti "pieces" (short for masterpieces) created by local spray-can artists. They've covered every inch.

CITY SCHOOL

From this neighborhood, downtown's skyscrapers are clearly visible on the other side of the freeway, but for the people who live here, the opulence and opportunity suggested by those skyscrapers is distant, even irrelevant, to their lives. The complicated relationship between young men and women of this and similar L.A. neighborhoods, and the paths to financial security and academic success was meant to be addressed by City School. ("City School" and all other proper names in this text, apart from references and citations, are fictitious.) In the center of downtown, on one of its busiest streets, this alternative charter school promised to offer young men and women from such neighborhoods, estranged from the goals of mainstream society, access to education and middle-class careers. Neither part of the official business of downtown, nor part of the

FIGURE 1.2: Belmont Tunnel.

traditional public school system, City School came to embody a liminal realm, the potential contact zone between economic opportunity and economic disenfranchisement—between downtown's high-rises, and the bulldozed lots just across the freeway. Designed especially for students who had dropped out of or been expelled from their former schools, and for young mothers or pregnant teens, City School explicitly encouraged these young people to return to high school and earn their diplomas. By recognizing and working in concert with the strong forces that pull these young men and women away from traditional high school, City School planned to offer a substantial, and substantially different kind of education for them.

City School began on the fourth floor of what looked like an abandoned business that had been converted into storage space—gray and dingy, no sign announcing the school, no marquis listing students of the week or the next date for parents' night. The acquisition of this site and the school's genesis is a story of the strategic melding of business and educational interests. Negotiations surrounding the new school began when Carlton Hobbes, an administrator at a local university, was having lunch with a friend that owned a bank downtown, near the original location of the school. The banker mentioned that he had several trade schools he couldn't operate privately anymore, vacant facilities now, in need of use. Hobbes, who had a history of being involved in outreach projects to bring inner-city high school students to the university, suggested that those

facilities could be used to help disadvantaged youth, and the banker was interested.

A few days later, Calvin Romaine, a former student at the university and a protégé of Hobbes, brought some young men from the nonprofit youth organization where he was working, to the university and they went to visit Hobbes in his office. Here Hobbes told Romaine about the vacant schools available and they began to think about forming a nonprofit organization for at-risk youth. Meanwhile the banker spoke with his neighbor, Paul Dennis, a psychologist at another local university, who also was interested in forming a new school for the at-risk students out of the now obsolete trade school. Eventually all four got together and made a deal. Hobbes, Dennis, and Romaine each pitched in $100 dollars and formed a nonprofit organization; later Hobbes talked to his friends at the school district headquarters and their organization became a school.

While City School emerged through the cracks of the city's infrastructure, efforts of city officials to develop a new school across the freeway (also part of Central City West) had been stymied for years—in large part by neighbors, who did not welcome the addition of another high school, but feared it. Their neighborhood already housed a large high school, with a dropout rate of 25–30%, which neighbors referred to as a "warehouse" full of potentially violent and dangerous teenagers. Schools, redefined as warehouses of undesirables, were unwelcome in this part of town, and the addition of another meant more potential problems: in the words of one neighbor, "crime, gang rivalries, and a parking squeeze." While the overcrowded neighborhood had been arguing for more public housing for nearly 20 years, they did not want a new high school. The opinion of local activists, their understanding that with school comes neighborhood violence, echoes not only the sensationalistic media portrayals of inner-city schools, but the findings of a long-term sociological study as well. As John Devine (1996) has written in his ethnography of urban schools in New York, lower-tier schools can come to function as warehouses, and the boundary between the school and the street, and the violence of each, is porous.

As the city was locked in controversy over their massive new school and housing project, Hobbes and Romaine were quietly transforming the vacant downtown building into a different sort of educational community. What had once been a banker's albatross became an administrator's social program, and then, his protégé's school. The banker's empty business academy now awaited a new population—the very students dropping out of the local high school, students that neighbors did not want around. In the heart of urban Los Angeles, with a list of former dropouts waiting to be admitted, what sort of community would be defined by this new school? How would the inhabitants be affected? Who would they be? Whether this school, born out of contingent opportunity, a meeting between a business executive and a higher education administrator, would provide safety and education for the disadvantaged and in many ways unwanted would be determined over the coming 19 months.

As I walked into the former business academy on my first visit to City School, a student/office intern stood behind the reception window where I signed in, while other students, all apparently in their late teens, milled about before going to classes. As Hobbes and Romaine had envisioned, these young people were all ethnic minorities, and as evidenced by the bustling child care center directly across from the reception area, many of them had children. For young women with children there were few other educational options. Many teenagers drop out even before they have their babies—while pregnant teens could feasibly continue to attend regular schools, the stigma of pregnancy often forces them to leave. Special "pregnancy schools" exist, but usually women over 17 are not allowed to attend.

Many of the students at City School didn't have babies, however. Other factors had led them to leave their former schools. As I would soon find out, for many students, loyalties to gangs (like Diamond Street) or tagging crews (groups of young people, similar to gangs, whose defining concern is propagation of their collective, written graffiti mark, or tag) and fellow grafitti artists (like those who congregate at Belmont Tunnel) had initially pulled them away from other schools, or led to their expulsion. Still other students had left their previous schools to work. A young man I had met tending the parking lot on the first floor couldn't afford the luxury of full-time school. He was working to support his family, and planning to attend City School too. Working kids, teens with babies, gang members, taggers—these were the students for whom Hobbes and Romaine planned to provide an education.

By working on the margins of the educational system, Hobbes and Romaine had managed to found a school for traditionally underserved minority students. Now five recently hired teachers were attempting to stem a tide of dropouts, young men and women who had already been failed by their traditional public schools. Statistically speaking, theirs was an impossible goal. The neighboring high school's dropout rate (the 25–30% cited above) was not encouraging, and the more general statistics gathered about this very demographic—ethnic minorities, teenage mothers, the urban poor—can be demoralizing. Even on cursory examination, dropout rates reflect gross and seemingly insurmountable inequalities, inevitably along socioeconomic and racial lines (cf., Fine, 1991; Kohl, 1967; Kozol, 1991; Monti, 1994). These dropout statistics, published annually, debated by policy makers, and printed in newspapers, also tend to create a homogeneous picture of inner-city schools largely as places of failure, devoid of meaningful interaction. But these statistics, by design, are also generalizations. As far as minority education goes, these generalizations are often overly broad and negative, sweeping over pockets of potential (Rose, 1995).

The goal of a many small, nontraditional schools is precisely to defeat such generalizations (cf., Meier, 1995, 1999) and to tap the potential in those students who traditionally drop out. Hobbes had deliberately founded a small school for

this purpose, and the teachers at City School often mentioned that these students were, to them, the most fascinating to teach, though often the most difficult to reach. Many of these students, failed disproportionately by schools, have, by necessity, forged alternative, powerful, and highly self-sustaining identities that are not so easily documented through statistical reports (Heath & McLaughlin, 1993; Trueba, Spindler, G., & Spindler, L., 1989). City School's goal, and one of the goals of my own research, was to find a way through to these young people by recognizing the complexity of their lives and the power of their non-school commitments. This complexity is not easily captured by statistics or generalizations, which are often exaggerated by the media (Jankowski, 1991).

But the forms students' alternative support systems take are often highly incompatible with continuing their education. For many young men and women, for example, ties to youth gangs provide much more substantial sources of self-esteem than school experiences they have had (Alvarez, 1993; Harris, 1988). Gangs also provide more promise of financial reward (Monti, 1994) or ethnic identity (Davidson, 1996; Mendoza-Denton, 1996; Talty, 1995) than a life committed to success in schools typically does. When young peoples' own families provide little financial or emotional stability, gangs (not schools) fill this void as well (Cooper, 1994; Jankowski, 1991), leading to a lifestyle that ultimately may be incompatible with school. Young women may seek a sense of belonging in such gangs or through starting families of their own (Harris, 1988). Whether young people who drop out of school join a gang or not, school provides little that is relevant or emotionally meaningful for them.

In general, these are the young men and women for whom City School wanted to provide an education, working not only to educate them, but also to attend to their different social, emotional, and practical needs. Through an awareness of the unique and tangible concerns of their students, City School promised to provide them with skills for mainstream success without taking away or denigrating their nonmainstream identities. City School would be saturated with meaningful interaction.

CHARTER SCHOOLS AND SCHOOL REFORM

The kind of interaction *within* City School and the very possibility for the genesis of such an educational community emerged out of a reform-oriented climate that fostered the idea of charter schools as an economically and politically feasible means to educational innovation (Alexander, 1993; Amsler & Mulholland, 1992; Bierlein & Mulholland, 1994; Diamond, 1994; Hill, 1994; Little Hoover Commission, 1996; Sautter, 1993; Shankar, 1988). After Hobbes and Romaine had started their school, they needed funding to keep it running. They were interested in securing state funds, but they did not want to be subject to the

curricular mandates and top-down management style of public schooling. Charter legislation, which had recently gone into effect, allowing the formation of ten new charter schools in the Los Angeles Unified School District, was designed to provide state resources for just such innovative programs. For Hobbes and Romaine, this was a policy plum that provided them a unique opportunity to create—and fund—a school designed for the disadvantaged and underserved students in the public school system, those students the local neighborhoods were currently "warehousing." One month after opening, City School applied for and attained charter status.

Charter Schools as Real Innovation

What is a charter school? Put most simply, a charter school is "an independent public school of choice, freed from rules but accountable for results" (Manno, Finn, & Vanourek, 2000, p. 736). Charter schools are state funded like all the public schools, but in contrast to traditional schools, they have freedom from state guidelines. While they are required to present a thorough and detailed charter stating their goals and criteria for success, the means by which schools attain this success is open. This definition is simple enough, but it does not fully convey the real signature of the Charter School movement—genuine, truly innovative change. When City School received its charter in 1993, the momentum of the Charter School movement was building, and as policy papers, research reports, and strong opinion emerged, so did the inevitable refrain of "innovation." The late Albert Shankar, former president of the American Federation for Teachers, was a key proponent of charter schools primarily because he saw charter schools as the only form of school restructuring that involved the innovation demanded in our radically changed times. "The point is," Shankar wrote in 1988, "that it's time to question or justify every assumption we have had about schooling for the last 150 years" (p. 94). Charter schools, Shankar wrote, were a vehicle for such innovative rethinking.

With Shankar's enthusiastic and public endorsement, the Charter School movement—and a renewed call for educational innovation—began. By 1993 (the year City School received its charter), there were three charter schools up and operating (all in Minnesota), and California had just passed the law allowing a total of 100 charters to be granted in the state. In 1992 and 1993, policy and research reports hailed charter schools as a "truly different alternative," "innovative" (Amsler & Mulholland, 1992, pp. 1–2), satisfying the need for "break the mold schools," "exciting, promising, and revolutionary" (Alexander, 1993, p. 764), and a "new breed of public schools" (Sautter, 1993). By 1994, California had 45 charter schools, and in that year President Clinton officially endorsed charter schools in his State of the Union address. With endorsement ranging from President Clinton to Albert Shankar to Lamar Alexandar to Gary

Hart, charter schools were catching on, and their reputation as real "innovation" appealed to both sides of the political spectrum.

While the idea of real innovation was crucial to charter schools' initial popularity, "innovation" has been a key concept on which charter schools have been attacked as well. Just as "innovation" can be seen as valuable for reformers of any stripe who are looking for something different, it can also be seen as problematic by critics on either side of the political spectrum. On the one hand, critics don't like innovation. Teacher unions, school boards, and school superintendents have argued that this innovation occurs at the expense of good jobs for teachers and real accountability, or that it threatens the future of the entire public education system (Manno, Finn, & Vanourek, 2000). On the other hand, critics who like innovation have argued that despite the heavy rhetoric of innovation, most charter schools are really not innovative at all (Good & Braden, 2000a; Wells et al., 1998a). Instead, many charter schools are simply a veiled form of elitist school choice legislation. This critique of innovation has caused much discussion. While a primary rationale for charter schools was to create a bureaucratic structure that would encourage innovation resulting in more educational opportunities for underserved minority populations, as the demographics of current charter schools suggest, they have also become a new way to preserve the status quo (Kolderie, 1994).

This critique, that charter schools are just a new way of funding schools for students who are already doing well, has become increasingly well documented. And hints of this problem were already apparent during the time of my study. When City School came into existence, four of Los Angeles's ten governmentally designated slots for charter schools were located in Pacific Palisades, an affluent neighborhood in which parents had begun to send their children to private schools when the overpopulated inner-city schools began bussing students to the suburbs. Palisades High began to lure back affluent neighborhood children by creating charter schools within the school (Pyle, 1995), essentially a form of internal tracking (cf., Oakes, 1985). Aside from City School, the city's nine other charter schools attracted successful students, generally highly motivated, with parents actively involved in their education (*Los Angeles Times*, 1994). In this way, charter schools, yet another educational option, had the potential to act as already common magnet schools, offering educational options for those already educationally successful, and taking successful students out of inner-city schools (cf., Devine, 1996).

City School as Real Innovation

In contrast, City School was one of a small number of "second- or third-chance" schools that "offer some students an enclave for education by tailoring opportunities that are not as readily available in the public school system" (Good &

Braden, 2000a, p. 246). City School specifically advertised itself to students that no other school would accept, mentioning school dropouts, expelled students, young mothers, and pregnant students in their enrollment brochure. Throughout its tumultuous 18-month existence, City School's student population was composed exclusively of low-income ethnic minorities, many of whom had spent time in jail or juvenile hall, had babies, or were active gang members. A year after its founding, 15% of City School's students were on parole and 85% had arrest records (*Los Angeles Times*, 1994). However, "tailoring opportunities" to fit the needs of this population, prone to absenteeism, inevitably behind grade level in all subjects, and most importantly, habitually identifying as non–school oriented, proved extremely challenging to City School.

The founders of City School clearly rose to the occasion of charter school fervor, founding a school downtown for at-risk students when seemingly no school could ever have been created for these kids through the usual means. After all, the city, the state, and the school system had been fighting for 20 years over placing a school in this area. Still, some readers may be skeptical. It sounds too easy. How could a few men get together and found a school over lunch? This is another hallmark and another point of criticism of charter schools. For many critics, school charters are simply too easy to get. Some states have become so enthralled with the idea of social capital created by a community of eager teachers and administrators, set loose to "innovate," that in their enthusiasm they have failed to even require coherent or complete proposals from charter school founders (Good & Braden, 2000b). In the case of City School, requiring a more coherent fiscal plan, and more closely monitoring City School's progress possibly could have saved the school, which, after only 16 months as a charter school, dissolved upon district audit, collapsed under mountains of debt.

The Paradoxes of Innovation

City School makes vivid some of the paradoxes of charter school legislation. Charter school legislation is designed precisely to allow creative thinking people like Hobbes and Romaine to seize opportunity and act to create new and innovative schools, in cases where a huge bureaucratic machine would not be able to. However, this same pathway to swift, innovative action is potentially an invitation to irresponsibility and negligence. In the case of City School, this lack of oversight led to fiscal disaster. Similarly paradoxical, charter school laws allowed Hobbes and Romaine to found a school for students that no other school system seemed capable of educating. However, the same school could be seen as enabling further inequity. That is, charter school laws granted City School permission to conduct, essentially, an educational experiment (one that ultimately failed), with little oversight, on those students already so disadvantaged

by the system. While one strategy is to use charter schools as pilot school settings for research and development, "sometimes a charter school that was not intended for R&D ends up serving that purpose" (Manno et al., 2000, p. 742). In the case of City School, the students who were involved in this charter school experiment ended up, after 16 months, without a school to attend, further discouraged by the system that was trying to educate them. Yet another paradox, and one fundamental to the kind of community that evolved at City School, was the complex curricular problem of educating students by building on students' disaffection from schooling. Inside this school, curriculum was designed to build on students' identities, to bring their concerns into a school context. However, most of what students oriented to, after years of negative educational experience, was the desire to be away from school.

One reason charter school legislation is so controversial is because it attempts to tackle these complex dilemmas of public education that, for so long, more limited school reforms have tried to gloss over. As Shankar made clear in 1988, simple, one-size-fits-all solutions like the calls for higher standards, more testing, or back-to-basics are not going to work in the complexity of today's school system. One look at the population of City School makes these solutions instantly ridiculous. Creating higher standards, for example, will not help a student who has been expelled from three different schools for fighting. Getting back to basics will not help a student who has excellent math skills, but has only used them to calculate fractions of ounces for drug sales. More testing on reading in English will not access the bilingual abilities of many of today's schoolchildren. Charter schooling is one way of institutionalizing more unique forms of accommodation to the infinite variety of schoolchildren using the public schools today. And City School exemplifies a school that sought out precisely this sort of variety.

These policy-level paradoxes were not only reflected in the institutional trajectory of City School. They were also evident in the kinds of interactions that took place inside the school, between teachers and students, every day. As teachers there struggled to fulfill their charter school mission to serve a population at-risk (and already failed by many other public schools) they came face-to-face with the contradictions of their own mission. Teachers and students alike found themselves in a unique environment, where students considered societal risks were grouped together for the sole purpose of succeeding in that same society. If a school attracts a population with unique needs, the school must be innovative in meeting those needs. Everyday, teachers at City School faced students who demanded new ways of teaching. How did teachers meet this demand? How did students respond to an entirely unique educational environment? This is a question about what goes on, not on a macro policy level, but on an interactional level, inside the classrooms of charter schools. However, despite the burgeoning literature critiquing charter schools, "little research ex-

ploring how students perform in charter schools has been produced" (Good & Braden, 2000b, p. 745). Furthermore, the research that has been done claiming to be more comprehensive skims the surface (e.g., Wells, 1998a, 1998b). Unfortunately, while there is much debate at the policy level about what should be changed in charter school legislation (cf., Good & Braden, 2000a) with the exception of the students and teachers who work and interact there, it seems nobody really knows what is going on inside charter schools.

Innovative Reform Calls for Innovative Research

The research at City School documented in the chapters that follow is one small contribution to this lack. I am not documenting "performance" of students in City School of the kind Good and Braden (2000a) are probably calling for. I do not focus on test scores, measures of language proficiency, or even graduation rates. Instead, I investigate the interactional terrain of City School. I look at the kinds of narrating that goes on between students, and how teachers access the identities students develop through narrative. I also examine how institutional context, the pressures of charter school legislation, and ultimately a district initiated audit influence the talk that goes on inside one charter school. By doing so, I illustrate how charter school legislation at times facilitated the creation of a truly unique educational context, and at times led to the censorship of certain voices and ways of thinking. The narratives and conversations I analyze here are a product of the charter school environment, and illustrate the dilemmas inherent in today's public schools by giving voice to those students usually thought to be "pushed out" (cf., Fine, 1991) or silenced.

As my study began, City School was just beginning its journey into schooling. At City School, in contrast to traditional public schooling, there were fewer scripted behaviors (cf., Gutierrez, Larson, & Rymes, 1995; Gutierrez, Rymes, & Larson, 1995) or codes to follow, and teachers often actively encouraged students to talk about (and me to record) their lives outside of school. As a result, some typically unheard voices came to the fore. By closely examining the interactions of these students and teachers, and by linking the policy level of school reform (charter school legislation) with interaction level issues of language, presentation of self, and adolescent identity, this research displays the real impact of charter school reform, in one school, for the students who experience it.

The Impact of City School on Charter School Reform

While City School failed, charter schools are probably here to stay. City School, in 1993, was one of the first charter schools in the nation. Eight years later, over 2,000 charters have been granted in the United States. Clearly this is a movement with some momentum. But even after 8 years of charter legislation,

there is no prescribed procedure for starting and maintaining an ideal charter school, and the direction of charter school legislation and action remains malleable. The movement is getting some history, however, and with history comes lessons. A school like City School, viewed closely, but with the 20/20 vision of hindsight, can provide some insight into the charter schools of the future.

One of the initial goals of charter school laws was to allow unheard voices and uneducated children to be heard and to receive an education. I argue, throughout this book, that the types of interactions at City School that brought new voices forward were made possible by charter school innovation. Despite this small success, City School's closure looms much larger in charter schools' collective history. City School, unfortunately, has become one of the examples of charter school failure held up in report after report as an example of, if not why charter schools in general are terrible, why charter schools need to change (Little Hoover Commission, 1996). City School, as a failure, can easily provide data for both of these arguments. But I wish to argue that its impact is more significant. City School's greatest impact, I hope to show, is in the attention it drew to the concerns of youth in Los Angeles, and the possibility for voicing those concerns and hearing them in classrooms.

DOING FIELDWORK IN EDUCATIONAL BORDERLANDS

Uncovering Language, Institution, and Identity

As Renato Rosaldo (1989) has observed, "[C]lassic norms of analysis make it hard to study zones of difference within and between cultures. From the classic perspective, cultural borderlands appear to be annoying exceptions rather than central areas for inquiry" (p. 28). While Rosaldo was speaking primarily about the dilemma faced by traditional anthropologists trying both to understand a community's individuals, while making useful generalizations about its practices, his statement is equally applicable to City School. The students at City School reveal themselves in such a variety of ways, and identify with such a complexity of worlds that they rapidly frustrate the desire, in the manner of "classic" social science, to generalize about categories like "ethnic minority," "high school dropouts," "gang members," "parolees," "graffiti artists," "teen mothers," "at-risk youth," or "high and low achievers." As the story of City School's founding suggests, even the category of "school" was being redefined here. In turn, the City School community proved to be a constantly changing mix of ways of speaking, dressing, acting, and telling stories. To understand City School, what drew students here, and whether these students would stay, was to understand precisely those "zones of difference" so annoying to the classic perspective. My own approach to understanding nuanced local categories of

identity would be to record interaction between members of the City School community and to study, in turn, the way in which such interactions, and my recording of them, was guided by the institution and unfolded over time.

While conversation and collaborative construction of identity came to be the focus of my research, the actual conversations I recorded and subsequently analyzed were also determined by my circuitous routing through City School. Rather than attempt artificially to pin down a definition of "typical" interaction at this school, or the identity norms for students and teachers, I recorded the way that identity and notions of typicality were structured through language as well as the institutionally circumscribed nature of these interactions. The institution, as it grew and changed, afforded varying opportunities for students and teachers to interact. Therefore, recording many different situations of language use at City School revealed the value not only of the minute interactional variables observable through a videotaped clip, but also those institutional variables that facilitate interaction and regulate the types of language used and in turn, the way that a conversation evolves. Over the course of my research, I began to see how the constantly changing culture within the City School community created changing expectations in any interaction, and how, in turn, language practices reshaped those expectations. Through this approach, almost any interaction at City School was meaningful—the "borderlands" and "annoying exceptions" described by Rosaldo, became integral to my research.

Discourse Analysis: Language as Lens

Analysis of language-in-use was my ticket of entry into these borderlands. In the chapters that follow, I will elaborate in more detail on the linguistic tools that facilitated my investigation. I will look specifically at *genre*, *narrative*, *grammar*, *naming*, and *indexicality* as linguistic resources students and teachers at City School use to establish individual identity and negotiate their social roles within this unique community.

These linguistic resources provide a lens through which to view multiple layers of context that make up the complex social arena of City School. Throughout my analysis, I use these tools to emphasize the concept of *coauthorship*. Discourse analysts have begun to reveal how localized views of "reality" are constructed and deconstructed (sometimes in a matter of seconds) through coauthored narrative. Conversation analysts have shown how speakers shape their utterances in minute detail according to the reactions of their listeners—their gestures, eye gaze, and conversational responses (Goodwin, 1979). This shaping has been called "recipient design" (Schegloff, 1972) and implicates not only the current speakers, but also any knowledge (or assumptions) the speakers have of their interlocutors' backgrounds and individual or cultural experiences. Because speakers are always designing their utterances according to their inter-

locutors' reactions, the audience becomes "coauthor" of the speech of any individual; the way in which speakers present themselves is as much a function of who they are speaking to as who they "really" are as individuals (Duranti, 1986).

Duranti (1986) has also observed that, while individual speakers accomplish certain local goals through interaction, these individual speakers simultaneously work within the goals of some larger institutional discourse structure. A young man's narrative, for example, may take a very different form when relayed to his parole officer than when told among his friends, and the difference between these two situations points to the institutionally situated nature of meaning. Therefore, narrative and micro-level linguistic analysis, as well as attention to "coauthorship" when combined with longitudinal study within a community, can provide insight into both the individual construction of goals and the institutional goals those individual voices may serve. City School, where traditional modes of schooling were being challenged in institutionalized ways, was an ideal location to study how language and conversation structure individuals' presentation of self, and how those same language practices are shaped by the institution within which they occur. Therefore, my research examines the effects of both interpersonal and *institutional* coauthorship.

Despite my attention to coauthorship, this research is *not* based on any sort of assumption that language itself creates reality or that language is more important than the events that happen to real people (the violence, for example, involved with gang activity, or the "Savage Inequalities" documented by Kozol [1991]). The focus on language here is neither meant to relativize all violence nor to belittle the larger forces that lead to the lack of positive life choices available to a large and particular section of the population, and most of the students at City School. Instead, my research is grounded in a methodology, both anthropological and linguistic, and profoundly empirical, which uses language as a means to explore culture and change (cf., Duranti, 1994; Ochs, 1988; Schieffelin, 1990). Microanalysis of language practices provides the researcher an empirical *entré* into the complex reality of communities. In this study, language, as viewed through videotaped and audiotaped interactions, provides a means to see the manner in which identities are formed and changed (and, certainly, masked) within everyday activities at City School.

Entering the Field

On my first visit, after signing in and standing bewildered in the front lobby, a student brought me to the office of a teacher/administrator, Laura, with whom I had an appointment to discuss how I could enter this community and begin my research. At the end of that visit, Laura invited me to start attending an "economics" class held every Thursday night. The following Thursday, and for the

next 4 weeks, I attended this as a participant/observer, taking part in all the activities as we created a mock community and ran our own businesses.

Through participation in this class, I gained a familiarity with students and school that would enable me to start recording, but, in this context, I also felt ineffectual as a researcher. Over the next 4 weeks, I worked side-by-side with students, as we exchanged "money," started new "businesses," or went "bankrupt." My interaction with the students focused exclusively on the economics tasks, and soon my role became that of unofficial teacher's aide, someone students could turn to for help or guidance in the classwork. But I felt I couldn't engage in talk about other topics since that would detract from the teacher's agenda. Gradually I became aware of what I was not learning about the school and the individual students by confining myself in the classroom. For students, school is often about peer groups and socializing at least as much as about "education" (cf., Eckert, 1989; Shuman, 1986; Sizer, 1984). Without knowing more about students' lives outside of the classroom, I would be missing a lot of what was happening inside the classroom.

Through this initial classroom experience, I felt, firsthand, the shortcomings of interactional research that looks exclusively at the classroom. While, in the manner of typical classroom research, I could have analyzed the interaction in this classroom with an eye toward curricular reform, without more knowledge about the students in this classroom, any recommendations I could glean would very likely be irrelevant. Indeed, the best classroom research looks to what students bring to the classroom with them and how their local knowledge relates to classroom activity. Discourse studies in schools have begun to reveal the immense complexities involved, the unique interactional complexion of each classroom (Mehan, 1985; Shuman, 1986), and the kinds of local discourse practices which school instruction needs to orient to in order to be more effectual (Gutierrez, 1995; Heath, 1982; Phelan, Davidson, & Yu, 1998). These studies have focused on the way in which interactions structure not only what is taught, but also who has access to that information. Those who, for example, aren't familiar with certain classroom question-and-answer routines (Philips, 1983) or certain presupposed cultural practices (Gutierrez, Rymes, & Larson, 1995) may fall behind. These classroom studies illustrate some of the interactional foundations for the statistics that show disproportionate amounts of school failure among ethnic minorities. They also indicate that the researcher must look outside of the classroom to understand what is going on inside it.

Therefore, rather than focusing my own research on the classroom, I wanted to understand who would be speaking in such classrooms, what young people within a school community felt about their participation there. I needed to ask the questions and understand these students in ways that classroom teachers ordinarily do not have the luxury of time to do. With this in mind and with the help and encouragement of Laura, I organized a discussion group on Friday

mornings when there were no classes scheduled. In this informal group, students could come and talk and I would be able to begin audio- and videotaping our interactions. Laura selected several students she thought should go, and I telephoned them to ask that they come.

I did want to ask students questions, but I did not ever approach them with a questionnaire or interview schedule. Instead, our interactions unfolded slowly, I spoke as little as possible, and encouraged the students to respond to one another, and not simply address me. This is known as a "spontaneous interview" process, notoriously uncomfortable for everyone involved (Wolfson, 1976); my first few discussions were tense, and the students were reticent, as they didn't know me very well and were not sure why they were there. Even in this strange atmosphere, however, they gradually began to open up, and I became more acquainted with their views of juvenile hall, the "hole," car-jacking, neighborhood loyalties, and the pervasive word, "respect." While I initially planned to learn about students' views of City School, these students spoke very little about their current school experiences, but had much more to say about their lives outside of school, and the events that led up to their departure from other schools. The narratives told by these students form the basis for Chapter 2, "Dropping Out," and the corpus analyzed there.

Both the institution (most obviously, by selecting these particular young people and allowing me to record them) and my presence as a researcher played important roles in shaping these stories. These roles, and the role of students' ethnicity, will be more fully analyzed in Chapters 2 ("Dropping Out") and 3 ("The Language of Dropping Out"), where those stories are discussed in detail. However, much of the way these discussions unfolded, while certainly guided by my presence and the encouragement of teachers at City School, was also determined by the students. The students eventually turned our sessions into an opportunity to meet up with their friends, hang out, plan their weekend activities, and, occasionally, to finish schoolwork. During the first 3 weeks, I encouraged attendance by calling several students the night before I came to remind them about our date, but soon other students, unbidden by telephone calls, began to drop in. We changed the location of our talks so we could be in a room the students preferred. We started listening to "oldies" during the sessions, and some students began drawing while we talked, which involved, for many, drawing their graffiti tag on paper. Over time, the sessions were defined more by the students than by my research agenda. I was, to borrow the title from Charles Briggs's (1986) book on language and ethnography, "learning how to ask"—precisely by not asking. As a result, I began to learn more about the students. Frequently, when I videotaped in the school, students would flash these tagged papers or throw gang hand signs, "representing" for the camera. The ubiquity of these names led me to focus on this aspect of their lives and, later, to see what meanings these signs held outside of this room, among teachers, school

administrators, and in students' neighborhoods. Chapter 6 ("Names") discusses the power that these visual signs hold for students *and* teachers. This is just one example of how the emergent nature of these discussion sessions turned them into lessons for me about how the students portrayed themselves and wanted to be perceived by others.

As I stepped out of the classroom and into the noninstructional discourse at City School, my discussion sessions allowed me to see the importance of peer relationships to students. Much of what I learned in those first months was afforded through the videotapes I made, which allowed me to go back to the students' conversations and view them repeatedly, trying to make sense of students' stories and the way they were told. My preliminary videotapes with these young people began to reveal how the audience, their reactions, and their presumed experiences shaped the way that these students spoke about their lives and individual histories. By looking at the language used to form and contest peer groups and the norms associated with them, I saw student and institutional identities as they emerged and changed through interaction outside the formal boundaries of classroom lessons. As my study continued I hoped to see how these conversations related to students' interactions in other settings at City School. If audience shaped the way students presented themselves, exactly who became an audience for these students' stories, and how they participated in their telling, would be crucial.

Following the Community Trajectory

When I began to record classroom interaction 6 months later, I was far more aware of conversations at the margins of the classroom, and the kinds of priorities students brought with them to class. I began to record discourse in and out of the classroom and not only between student peers, but also between students and their teachers, and between students who do not ordinarily interact with one another. In this way I hoped to learn how conversation, and in particular, the types of conversation afforded by this school context, influenced the students. The conversations analyzed in Chapters 7 ("When Friends Aren't Friends") and 8 ("Rights to Advise") are drawn from these tapes.

During my last 5 months at City School, another opportunity for taping arose. Laura, the same teacher who had organized my initial Friday talk sessions was now interested in having me tape another set of interviews with students who had completed an intern program at the school. Again she selected the students I would interview initially. Unlike the first students I interviewed, however, she referred to these young men and women as her "success stories" and thought that it was important that I document their views of the intern program. I agreed, but tried for the most part to follow the format of my initial interviews, letting the students talk among themselves. I had them discuss their intern expe-

riences, but I also encouraged discussion of other aspects of their lives and their perspectives on school. These stories form a dramatic contrast to the initial stories I gathered and form the corpus for Chapter 5 ("Dropping In: Narratives of School Success").

As these final interview sessions most sharply delineate, my presence at City School was by permission of the school, and was therefore guided by what the school allowed and sometimes even encouraged me to see. My continued presence was also guided by my own interest as a researcher into the social and linguistic forces that pushed students in and out of school. After my initial interview sessions, the school gradually became larger and that December, five months after receiving charter status, the school moved to a new location. In January they completely restructured their program. By this time, however, I had come to record not discussion with me, but spontaneous interactions in and around the school. I began by recording classes and the impromptu conversations within them, and continued by recording discussions at the boundaries of classes, before classes started, and between classes. As the school began to self-destruct, schedules and classrooms, any outward structure constantly in flux, I recorded almost anything that looked interesting: Exchanges at the metal detector, sudden arguments, final good-byes between teachers and their students. Then, 12 months after relocating, the school was closed for good. The students were left with a sign on the door to notify them school was shut down, and another sign listing possible Graduate Equivalency Degree (GED) programs. After the school closed and the community had dispersed, I found it much more difficult to find students and to talk. In the following few months, however, I spoke to teachers and administrators, recording their perspectives on why the school had closed and how it had failed.

My research began one month after City School officially received their charter school status, and continued as City School occupied two different campuses, redesigned their curriculum, expanded from a school with 50 students to one of nearly 500, and after 18 months, closed their doors. After the school had its first set of graduates, it also set up the Associates Program to ease students through the transition from high school graduation to a secure job or a place in college. This program provided a year of support for these graduates as they interned at various institutions, learned computer skills, and were coached in life skills. This program would also be a highly controversial expenditure when the school closed down after being audited by the school district. The perspectives of some of the "associates" and the questions raised about this program will be discussed in Chapters 5 and 9, respectively. I visited the school regularly between July 1993 and January 1995, when the school closed, and continued to talk about the school with teachers and staff while the school closed down and over the following summer. Though the school's life was short, few of the students were there through the duration. Some dropped out and returned, and

many had only sporadic attendance. This constant change is reflected in the nature of many of the interactions I recorded. Classes often took on a very spontaneous format, necessarily adjusting to unexpected numbers. Teachers had to be ready to accommodate between 2 and 40 students. Similarly, students had to be ready for the size, format, and even the scheduling of their own classes to change without warning. The most debilitating example of this phenomenon occurred in January 1995, when a sign appeared on the door of the school:

ATTENTION
TO ALL CITY SCHOOL
STUDENTS

The School is Closed. Please
come back on Monday 9
o'clock. L.A.U.S.D. will be
here to help you find a
convenient school to go to.
L.A.U.S.D. will be here from
9:00 A.M. to 10:00 A.M.

As this note suggests, students who had dropped in ultimately faced the fact that their school itself had dropped out of existence. This final failure reflects an unsteadiness I experienced as a researcher at the school throughout my fieldwork and through the stories and experiences of the students I talked with and recorded. By tracing the trajectory of this school and the voices within it, this research aims to provide one picture of urban schooling and its inherent dilemmas. I examine primarily the voices of the students whom City School was meant to serve, and secondarily, the voices of the teachers who struggled to fulfill City School's complicated mission.

The failure of the City School provides one sort of closure to this research, but there is no closure to the problems the school tried to address. The neighborhood across the 110 freeway is still locked in protest over the construction of another "warehouse" for high school students. The violence that took the lives of three of City School's students continues to threaten. Schools that try, above all, to create and maintain order within a complex urban environment continue to push out those students who threaten order. In the end, the contradictions, which found an uneasy coexistence within City School, are still unresolvable, but the multiplicity of perspectives and their composite wisdom remains.