Schooling in the contemporary world has a multiple agenda: the promotion of economic progress, the transmission of culture from generation to generation, and the cultivation of children’s intellectual and moral development. This book explores the difficulties of achieving a synthesis of these objectives, in a case study of a rural African community. The analysis contrasts the indigenous perspective on child development with the formal educational model of cognitive growth. Teachers in the local primary school are shown to face the challenge of bicultural mediation, and the significance of schooling is discussed for each of the diverse individuals of the study in terms of his or her own reflections and interpretations. Two different attempts to activate a local dialogue about the school as a community resource are described, and the implications for approaches to educational planning are explored.
The significance of schooling
The significance of schooling

Life-journeys in an African society

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A.1 Alternative metaphors for schooling and their implications
Preface

This book is about a large topic and a small community. If that disparity of scale seems to reflect a strategic weakness – an insufficient database to allow of generalisation – my defence is that I believe the disparity to be intrinsic to a central problem of education in the modern world. My broadest purpose here is to explore the nature of formal education and the reasons for under-realisation of its potential in societies of the Third World. The major stimulus for this ambitious venture has come from my intermittent acquaintance over a period of fourteen years with a cohort of young people born into a small-scale agricultural community on the periphery of Zambia, a newly independent African nation.

Contrasts of scale lie at the root of my analysis. Education is fundamentally about individual experience. But when its aggregate social significance is interpreted, a quantum leap is often made to the level of a province, state or region. As a psychologist I am interested in the significance of schooling for individual life-journeys, and as a social scientist my preoccupation is with those dimensions of community which are accessible to individuals in more than a token sense. As a citizen of the world, I have become increasingly sceptical of the rarefied, idealistic abstractions which proliferate in United Nations declarations concerning the universal brotherhood of mankind. Likewise on a national plane, although I have been an enthusiastic advocate of decolonisation, I find that the rhetoric of national development tends often to mystify rather than to empower the actors it recruits. A genuine sense of community can only grow from long-term personal acquaintance and trust.

In 1976 I concluded my book *Culture’s influence on behaviour*, which reviewed the burgeoning literature on culture and psychological development, with two challenges: generation of radical theoretical alternatives, springing from an analysis by psychologists from non-Western cultural backgrounds of features of behaviour which are distinctive to their culture; and adaptation of those borrowed Western institutions, the factory and the school, to conform better with the
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aspirations and skills of other cultural groups. As an immigrant to Africa whose primary socialisation was in the West, it has seemed more appropriate for me to focus on the second of these tasks. But, as I hope this book makes clear, I do not believe it can be successfully addressed in isolation from the former. An indigenous theoretical conceptualisation of human development and socialisation is an essential adjunct to the adaptation of exogenous institutions for endogenous progress in the field of education.

The book has several themes which interpenetrate one another. Before making a case for their interconnectedness, each must be presented in its own right. The integrative principle, however, can be simply stated as follows. Human understanding not only is expressed in, but also arises from, the process of communication. In order to communicate successfully, an author (speaker, artist or theorist) must share certain presuppositions with her audience. We can describe this body of essential shared presuppositions in many different ways, some complementary, some mutually incompatible, none of them entirely satisfactory: we may say the author and audience must share a common language, a common culture, an agreed definition of the purpose of their interaction, an awareness of an implicit range of alternatives. When communication is proposed between two people about the behaviour or the experience of one or more others, this logical requirement is partially extended to the third party. There needs to be a connection between the presuppositions shared by the author and audience and those of the human subject about whom they are communicating.

In the chapters which follow, I argue that this requirement is seldom if ever met, and that the resulting imperfections of communication can be traced to the different perspectives afforded to each member of the triad by her position or point of view. I also argue that an awareness of the problem is the first step towards overcoming it. Perspectives are not hermetically sealed off from one another: we can, albeit often with great difficulty, understand a bit of what reality looks like from another person’s point of view. The attempt to do so is an enduring, optimistic project of humanity, which deserves reaffirmation in the face of a growing bureaucratisation and commoditisation of knowledge in the modern world.

My indebtedness to others for inspiration and understanding is greater in the case of this book than anything else I have written. It extends along three dimensions. 1. I have discussed the topic and tried out drafts of my ideas about it with a wide range of people over a period of several years. 2. The data collection has brought me into contact with people at an unusual level of intimacy, so that I feel that the members of the study cohort and their relatives, neighbours and
teachers have shared more of their time and experience with me than I have generally come to expect of the people whose lives I sample in the course of research. 3. The nature of the issues to which the study is addressed is so general that I find myself drawing many connections with my everyday life as a parent and teacher, and in earlier days as a child and a pupil.

My intellectual debts to individual writers and commentators are acknowledged in the notes appended to the text. The conception and writing of the book has been a preoccupation since 1982. Many colleagues and students at the University of Zambia have put up with my meandering thoughts on the subject since then, and have collectively sharpened my appreciation of the enduring significance of indigenous concepts and values in the process of education in Africa. Long-term participation in the affairs of the University has afforded me the privilege of feeling a member of Zambian society, a feeling which is too complex to articulate in this preface. I hope this distillation of ideas about our educational system will be received in the spirit of a contribution to our society’s ongoing collaborative task of self-determination. Fieldwork, travel and data analysis were financed by the University of Zambia under a series of research grants for the study of intelligence, adaptation and education (1973–1987).

The Psychology Department at the University of Hull provided a hospitable haven for reflection and data analysis during my sabbatical leave in 1983–4. The Rockefeller Foundation provided both financial support at a critical period in 1987–8 and a uniquely congenial group of African peers with whom to exchange ideas in Dakar, Harare and Bellagio. And the Laboratory of Comparative Human Cognition at the University of California, San Diego, provided me with the encouragement I needed to persevere with trying to present a set of African issues to a Western audience. Most recently the Psychology Department of the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, has provided resources to enable me to complete the last phases of data analysis, writing and editing which have often seemed almost insurmountable hurdles.

Earlier drafts of several parts of the book were presented at two meetings sponsored by the Rockefeller Foundation under their Reflections on Development programme: one in Harare, Zimbabwe, in January 1988, the other in Bellagio, Italy, in July 1988. I received very frank and valuable comments on both occasions from several conference participants both on the argument advanced in chapter 1 and on its elaboration in other chapters. Without wishing to embarrass them with any suggestion that they would agree with all or part of what appears in these pages, I take this opportunity to express my gratitude to all of the following people whose comments significantly influenced my thinking about the study: Claude Ake, Ledvina Carino,
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Michael Chege, David Court, Ariel Heryanto, Thandika Mkandawire, Penina Mlama, Resil Mjares, Joyce Moock, Micere Mugo, Alistair Mundy-Castle, John Ohiorhenuan, Ralph Scott and Crawford Young.

The community referred to as Kondwelani in the text is a real place with an actual school. I have tried to protect the privacy of individuals and villages by according them pseudonyms, except in those cases where the individual has explicitly granted permission for me to do otherwise. It is a striking reflection of the graciousness of Chewa social etiquette that I cannot recall a rude or unkind word from any of the people with whom I have spoken in this community over the years since 1973. Over and above that polite tolerance, I have been most kindly and hospitably received into their homes by the families of Chikomeni Banda, the late Godfrey Banda, Panganani Banda, Mr Chisi, Mr Chuni, Mr Masiye and Peter Phiri. To all these families and to the people whose lives and dilemmas I have tried to interpret in this book I am deeply grateful.

Both of my parents were scholars and teachers. The efforts they made to ensure that my education would be supportive of my personal development and understanding of the world have doubtless shaped my perspective on the topic more deeply than I can explain. In addition to their delight in the art of discussion which suffused my childhood, they provided what stand out for me as three crucially valuable opportunities: enrolling me in the Lycée Francais de Londres for my primary schooling, tolerating an impetuous interruption of my formal schooling at the age of 16, and facilitating my informal admission to the multicultural University of Singapore for a year before I went to study at Oxford. In more recent years, my late father, Michael Serpell, introduced me to the work of Philippe Ariès, and my mother, Estelle Serpell, has discussed with me in depth drafts of several parts of this book. It is characteristic of her lifelong commitment to the tolerance of diversity that she wishes it well despite our many disagreements!

The other nuclear family of which I am a part has been established with my wife, Namposya Serpell, to whom I am indebted in multifarious ways. We have shared more than three-quarters of my lifetime in Zambia, savouring together the subtleties of communication across the interfaces among cultures, languages and generations which contribute so much to the quality of everyone’s life in that society. We have had the joint privilege of parenting five children, Derek, Mwila, Zewe, Chisha and Carla, who have taught me more about developmental psychology than my professional work and yet have had to put up with a father for ever immersed in reading and writing. Apart from their all-important contribution to my sense of personal identity, each of the individual members of this family has shaped my perspective on schooling in significant ways by illustrating the diversity of educational

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experience and helping me to empathise with several varieties. I do not expect them to agree with this book nor indeed necessarily to read it, but I am grateful to them for being with me while I was writing it. Special thanks to Derek for drawing Figures 1.1, 1.3 and 6.2.