

## Preface

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The story of this volume unfolds like a fairy tale. Once upon a time, a fairy sent a letter to a professor at one of Europe's smallest universities. The recipient was a Swiss social psychologist who was preparing to celebrate the centenary of a compatriot, Jean Piaget, a major developmental psychologist. His prominence was fading in his own country both because of an increasing emphasis on technological and economic problems and because of a diminished concern for the education of youth. This was occurring despite the overwhelming presence of inquisitive young people in the social science departments, who sought help in making meaning of their seemingly ever-changing world; in reflecting on intergenerational relationships, social bonds, and individual autonomy; in trying to understand their cultural diversity and historical heritage; and in worrying about the future.

Upon opening the letter, the professor thought she was dreaming. It was an invitation to "secure the help of two or three colleagues in convening at Marbach Castle a group of 40 scientists of your choice, young promising researchers and confirmed senior scientists from all over the world, to work on an issue that is of primary importance for young people's future." I was the professor, the "fairy" was Klaus J. Jacobs, and the magic wand was the Johann Jacobs Foundation, well known for supporting important innovative projects and encouraging worldwide communication among scientists. A series of annual conferences on youth, sponsored previously by the Johann Jacobs Foundation, had resulted in important publications (e.g., Bandura, 1995; Petersen & Mortimer, 1994; Rutter, 1995).

I turned to Clotilde Pontecorvo, an Italian specialist on the role of talk and conversation in the growth of thinking in the home and in schools, with extensive experience among teachers, educators, and politicians; to

Lauren Resnick, an American cognitive psychologist who, after having studied socially shared cognition and the school-to-work transition, has become deeply involved in the educational assessment of young people; and to Tania Zittoun, a Swiss graduate student whose recent personal experience of youth and professional training in social psychology and the psychology of emotions have made her a keen observer of her contemporaries' creative involvement in music, art, and other forms of social life. She provided a constant reminder of both the importance of transgenerational transmissions and the autonomous role of the young in making sense of contradictions in the "established worlds" into which young people are supposed to integrate.

Thus, on November 6–8, 1997, researchers representing diverse disciplinary perspectives from many European countries, including Russia and Yugoslavia, as well as from North America, South Africa, and the Middle and Far East, convened at the Johann Jacobs Foundation's Communication Center at Marbach Castle in Germany. The success of the conference prompted us to prepare a book dealing with the most important issues. Because our authors represent a range of theoretical perspectives expressed in nine different native languages, it became necessary to add Barbara Burge, an expert in international editing, to our team of editors.

This volume builds on the work and discussions of that conference. The initial question presented to conference participants was: How do social interactions provide opportunities for young people to learn life skills? It aimed at identifying the resources available to youth for fruitful peer interactions and other forms of interactive learning. Our scrutiny of the various facets of this issue led us to restate the question in a broader perspective: In this current period of profound societal transformations, under which conditions and with what kind of vertical or horizontal support do young people develop skills and acquire knowledge? When (and why) are these meaningful to them? The conference debates enlarged the understanding of learning by placing this basic activity at the intersection of expert transmission, self-crafted competence, and social participative activity. It raised new issues, called for theoretical reframings, and established the basis for the genuine multidisciplinary perspective presented in our volume.

We are indebted to the Johann Jacobs Foundation and its board for their exceptionally helpful support and an exceedingly gracious environment for our work. Their open invitation and exhilarating discussions in the early planning stages of the conference foreshadowed their constructive collegiality throughout. I also want to acknowledge the invaluable support of Pierre Ducrey, archaeologist and former Vice Chancellor of the University of Lausanne, for his helpful advice, encouragement, and thought-provoking

questions and the decisive impulse provided by Laszlo Nagy, former President of the Johann Jacobs Foundation, who drew on his substantial personal experience and on the Foundation's long history of involvement in projects with youth, notably the Boy Scout and Girl Scout federations. With the diligent help of Judith Kressig, Theo Brenner, the current President of the Foundation, has been a valuable partner in setting the effort in motion and shepherding it, step by step, to publication.

We thank all those conference participants who did not contribute chapters to this book for their stimulating contributions to the debates. In writing their chapters, the authors included herein have drawn extensively upon this collective venture.

Very special thanks are due to the members of the board of the Johann Jacobs Foundation. We greatly appreciate that most of them actively participated in the initial planning meeting and were a vital part of the entire conference. We sincerely thank them for their genuine interest and cogent comments: Paul B. Baltes, Pierre B. Ducrey, David A. Hamburg, Christian Jacobs, Heinrich Ursprung, and especially the Chairman, Klaus J. Jacobs, whose personal commitment to a profound and empirically based reflection on these important matters is an important testimony. From the first draft of the conference design to the very last moments of the 3 days of work in Marbach, Klaus J. Jacobs honored us with his presence and enriched our discussions by sharing his worldwide experiences and in-depth reflections.

#### REFERENCES

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