ETHNOGRAPHY AND EDUCATION: RESEARCH ISSUES ACROSS TIME AND SPACE

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Contents

Summary

This chapter explores the relationship between ethnography (as a research method and outcome) and education (in formal and informal settings); more specifically, it focuses on the resultant research field known as *ethnography in education* or *educational ethnography*. While the first section provides a brief introduction to ethnography in education, the second section conceptualizes the definition of this research field according to the corresponding discussions and arguments as well as some apparent misunderstandings in the perceptions of ethnography. The third section describes the creation of the field as well as the topics dealt with during the first thirty years of its development mainly in Western countries but also in other parts of the world. The fourth section attempts to give a broad view of "educational ethnography" which currently is a well developed research field all over the world and which has dealt with a great variety of topics and settings. This section is organized into five broad topics: race, ethnicity and nationality; gender and schooling; cultures of schooling and education policies; children and youth in education. The final section synthesizes the chapter and looks to future topics in the field of ethnography and education.

1. Introduction

"Ethnography in education" or "educational ethnography" is a research field widely spread throughout different academic communities all over the world. Anthropologists,

sociologists, educators, psychologists, linguists, and others have utilized ethnographic approaches in carrying out studies on educational issues. These studies have consolidated a way of understanding and problematizing educational processes. In contrary to other approaches of educative investigation, educational ethnography involves the comprehension of the "global" according to the "local" and vice versa; utilizes a wide variety of strategies and techniques for data collection; refers to concepts from different academic traditions; and takes into account native epistemologies for analytical process. Consequently, educational ethnography is based on a strong anthropological tradition that not only frames but also sets the limits of the definition of ethnography.

Such definitional matters are taken up in the first section of this chapter, where we clarify some false assumptions and misunderstandings about ethnography, above all those that narrowly conceive it only as a method. This first section also allows for a richer understanding of the nuances of the ethnographic approach, its assets as well as its limits, and its differences from other ways to approach educational investigation. Thereafter, the second section discusses the first thirty years of the development of ethnography in education, a research field that today is widespread throughout the world. Continuing this internationalized focus on ethnography in education, the third section of this chapter portrays a wider picture of this approach, based on examples of research studies from different parts of the world. This representation by no means attempts to be exhaustive; nor does it intend to serve as a geographically arranged inventory of studies in educational ethnography. Rather, the third section is organized according to the lines of research that have emerged from different local contexts. As a result, we have clustered the studies into five different topics. These topics relate to important academic insights and frameworks that had impact on political agendas acknowledging inequality and the need for cultural and educational democratization. The discussion of these topics puts the reader in contact with the multiple ways to deal with questions and issues from the perspective of different contexts and conditions. This allows the reader to be in touch with one of the most salient of ethnographic traits: "deliberately strongly contextualized and centered around local meanings" (van Zanten 2011: 311)

2. Definition Issues

Ethnography is simultaneously one of the most exciting and misunderstood research methodologies and research products within educational research (Walford, 2008: vii)

What makes ethnography so stimulating when we research educational processes? Why does ethnography generate so many false assumptions in the field of educational research? Why do we refer to ethnography as the method and outcome of research? Contemplating these questions will allow us to define concepts and issues relevant to the field of ethnography and education.

Ethnography is "a form of social and educational research that emphasizes the importance of studying at *first hand* what people do and say in particular contexts. This usually involves fairly lengthy contact, through participant observation in relevant settings, and/or through relatively open-ended interviews designed to understand

people's perspectives, perhaps complemented by the study of various sorts of document -official, publicly available, or personal" (Hammersley, 2006: 4). Fieldwork in ethnographic research includes a wide range of tasks that links the researcher to places, social agents, and objects; and the fieldwork produces an outcome that could be defined as the course of experience. However, undoubtedly, when we refer to ethnographic fieldwork, we refer to *participant observation* which according to Guber (2001) involves a controlled and systematic observation of everything that happens around the ethnographer who herself participates in one or more community activities. The term 'participation', according to Guber, depicts the researcher as being 'inside' the researched community; and from this position, the ethnographer remains alert to register the varied moments and events of everyday life (2001: 57). As Delamont states, "The more thinking and writing and reading that has gone into developing foreshadowed problems the better: but no one should think, write and read *rather* than go into the field and start observing" (emphasis in original, 2008: 40). Thus, observing and participating form part of the same process of production and construction of knowledge.

We need to understand this process in order to define ethnography and differentiate among the diverse possibilities when researching education. It is this particular manner of generating knowledge *along with* those who live and share the educational contexts that makes ethnography so exciting: "The starting-point is not the self, but the field into which the ethnographer invests her powers of imagination. Through this investment the ethnographer arrives at an understanding not only of 'culture' or 'society', but more importantly of the processes by which cultures and societies are reproduced and transformed" (Hastrup & Hervik, 1994: 2). This sense of total understanding makes ethnography very appropriate to the researching of educational processes which, in turn, are basic for the understanding of social and cultural reproduction and transformation.

Here it is important to highlight that the choice of a context (e.g. a school, classroom, park, or ministry office) along with its social actors (e.g. teachers, professors, administrators, principals, students, or parents) does not presuppose the reduction of the field of study: "A 'field' is never totally coincident with the group, the context or the institutions from which a question to be asked or a problem to be understood (and hopefully solved) arose" (Gobbo, 2003: 6). Thus, to understand the concept of field also entails the understanding of knowledge as an outcome of both analytic and empirical work derived from the collaboration of the ethnographer and the community.

In a reciprocal manner, these social actors face each other's ideas, notions, emotions and practices. This is the basis of the educational ethnographic practices that many scholars and teachers carry out nowadays. Ethnographic practice creates associations between researchers and researchees, and does not consider the latter objects of investigation. Teachers, professors, parents, and students participate, accompany and collaborate with the researcher during the ethnographic process. According to Guber (2001), the main tool of the ethnographic process is the researcher herself. As such, the researcher continuously analyses three types of fieldwork-related reflexivity: (1) the reflexivity of researcher as member of a society or culture; (2) the reflexivity of researcher as researcher with a theoretical stance, academic interlocutors, disciplinary habitus, and epistemocentrism; and (3) the reflexivities of the population researched (Guber, 2001: 49).

This process of ethnography can be compared with the process of learning. First of all, the ethnographic process can be described as the incorporation of actions, interactions, feelings, thoughts, perceptions and communications of different cultural ways of doing and being. Even in cases when the ethnographer develops research in her own context, aspects such as social class, nationality, religion, ethnicity, race, gender, age, and ableness are, undoubtedly, markers of difference. Secondly, mutual trust between the researcher and the researchees is necessary; and when such trust is absent in one of the parties, progress in ethnographic research is hindered. Third, ethnography involves a very wide and almost unlimited range of techniques and methods of research. In this sense, the ethnographic process seems analogous to the learning process of children who "often adopt a 'magpie' attitude to information, picking up anything that looks interesting" and who "in order to satisfy their curiosity" usually rely on "many different forms of data and ... a variety of different methods to generate it — looking, listening, asking, watching, experimenting and so on" (Walford, 2008: 9). Finally, "just as a learner needs continually to test what is being learnt against prior knowledge and to be aware of where there are gaps in knowledge ... the ethnographer ... similarly [has] to be aware of prior assumptions and lack of knowledge" (2008: 10). Perhaps these similarities between ethnography and learning have made ethnography so conducive to educational research.

The use of ethnography in educational research has motivated diverse discussions about how to define ethnography. These discussions, however, have also created false assumptions or misunderstandings about the nature of ethnography. Let us mention what seem the five most common ones. The first deals with the definition of educational ethnography as qualitative research in opposition to quantitative research. It is true that the ethnographer's work encompasses thick descriptions of the different ways of living and thinking of human groups. This, nevertheless, does not imply the rejection of, or obstruction to, sources, data or tools of quantitative research analysis. Spindler and Spindler claim: "Some people seem to regard ethnography as in confrontation and conflict with statistically oriented research design. To us this is nonsense. We usually publish results in both forms simultaneously [...]. The quantitative data, and its analysis and testing, also provide us with parameters within which our ethnography must be understood" (1987: 28).

The second assumption or misunderstanding involves the perception that the flexibility of ethnography as theory and practice of knowledge opens endless possibilities for its application to educational topics. As seen below, the topics and questions studied through ethnography are diverse and substantial, but not endless. The third misunderstanding relates to the 'rustic' perception of ethnography. Usually, educational ethnographers carry out their fieldwork by themselves or in small groups and utilize few or very basic technological tools for the analysis and report of their results. This feeds the often misleading perception that ethnographic work is financially inexpensive to undertake; and this perception, in turn, devalues ethnographic work and its outcomes. The fourth false assumption is to describe ethnography as a set of fieldwork techniques and to conceive this fieldwork as a restricted stage of data gathering. According to Wolcott: "A researcher could conceivably use one major fieldwork technique (e.g., participant observation, interviewing), many techniques (the respectable multi-instrument approach o ¨triangulation¨) or every field technique ever used by

ethnographers, and still not come up with an ethnographic study. True, one would have the stuff from which ethnography is constructed, but that is not much of a boast when ethnography is made of such everyday stuff" (1987: 38).

Lastly, the fifth common false assumption is to consider educational ethnography *just* a description, which reduces its findings in terms of scientific validation. It is true that ethnography implies description. However, description in social sciences is not an easy matter. According to Runciman (in Guber, 2001: 13) social sciences include three levels of understanding: report, explanation and description. Of these three levels, the last is the most complex. It consists of an interpretative report generated by the manner in which the researcher's theoretical framework interacts with the community members' beliefs and contentions. Frake puts it as follows: "To describe a culture…is not to recount the events of a society but to specify what one must know to make those events maximally probable. The problem is not to state what someone did but to specify the conditions under which it is culturally appropriate to anticipate that he, or persons occupying his role, will render an equivalent performance. This conception of cultural description implies that an ethnography should be a theory of cultural behaviour in a particular society" (in Wolcott; 1987: 41). Thus, when defining educational ethnographic research we are referring to a methodology, a text genre, an epistemological stance and a specific practice of knowledge that implies certain ways of posing questions, defining problems, and constructing research objects.

3. The Beginning: The First Thirty Years

Ethnographic studies within education began in "the 1950s or earlier in Germany, the United States, Japan, Brazil, and Mexico" (Anderson-Levitt, 2011(a): 16-17). Later, between 1960 and 1990, educational ethnography emerged as an academic discipline *in* and *of itself.* This led to considerable research production on a worldwide level, as seen below in our description of the thematic accounts and representative research from some of the milestone studies and publications from different regions of the world.

In the USA, the anthropology of education has existed as a subfield of anthropology since the 1950s. The event that gave it its status as a separate discipline was the Conference on Education and Anthropology organized by George and Louise Spindler in Stanford in 1954. Later, these scholars stated that "ethnographic approaches to the study of education, as a subset of qualitative research have surged to prominence only in the past decade [1970]" (Spindler & Spindler, 1987: xi). In this manner, educational ethnography began its history as a subfield of cultural and social anthropology. Its founders primarily were American and British anthropologists — Bateson, Benedict, Evans Pritchard, Herscovits, Mead, Radin, Redfield, Sapir, Whiting, Boas — who committed themselves to the study formal educational systems and acculturation processes (Eddy, 1985: 84). During the 1960's, educational anthropology gained the status of applied anthropology and experienced a considerable development for reasons such as the increased institutionalization of university studies for professors and teachers (Walford, 2008:5), the alignment of academics with civil rights and student movements (Levinson, 2005: 339) and the promotion of educational reforms in the certain states in the USA. It was in the 1970s, when certain strands, such as the microethnographic perspective, the interactional ethnography and the discourse-based

ethnographies, were used for the first time in educational ethnographies (Bloome et al., 2005). Most educational ethnographic investigations tended to counteract the misconceptions in the way culture was defined by educational research from 'conventional' psychologists and sociologists. The investigations attempted to correct the superficiality of those studies that neglected the natural context of behavior (Eddy, 1985: 93); questioned the technocratic approach that prevailed in education (Wilcox, 1982: 488); and highlighted the importance of cultural contexts and cultural disconnections in the quest for appropriate understanding of the "school failure" phenomenon of minorities, primarily Native Americans and African Americans. The concern to understand the link between socioeconomic and cultural diversity and 'deficient' educational outcomes led to the study of the core of the experience of students belonging to the so-called 'minorities' (Ogbu, 1974). By focusing on students from diverse social and cultural groups, ethnographic researchers became aware that the perceptions had by these groups toward educative institutions were not only different but also were influenced in a differentiated manner. This, in turn, led to a focus on the divergent academic trajectories and socioeconomic orientations among different groups. USA ethnographers also carried out research in Africa. Within this specific selection of contexts, there was a marked reference to colonialist conceptions. These conceptions, as is well known, have been discussed in anthropology and have generated an overall reframing within the anthropological discipline (Atkinson & Delamont, 1980; Walford, 2008).

Although the development of educational anthropology in Canada was closely related to educational anthropology in the USA, "*Canadian* anthropology ... derives largely from the Hawthorn Studies and from the historical and regional influences of Canadian social and political life on anthropological scholarship" (Fisher, 1998: 99). Up to the 1970's there were Canadian boarding schools for native children who were taken away from their home communities, indoctrinated into the western lifestyle, and isolated from their parents, relatives and other members of their communities. These schools were constantly denounced for the abuses suffered by the children. The first to study these boarding schools was Hawthorn who in the late-1950's carried out research on indigenous communities in British Columbia. Following from Hawthorn's research, many educational ethnographies in the 1960's and 1970's criticized the schooling of indigenous communities.

Within the UK and particularly in England during the 1960's and 1970's, a particular kind of ethnographic educational research was developed which, unlike those studies in the USA, did not have an anthropological foundation. Up to this point in time, British anthropology had not particularly focused on forms of socialization and the approaches on language were not oriented to daily practices. In this context, education and anthropology did not have a considerable development. However, as part of an anti-'positivist' and pro-'interpretative' strand from the sociology of education, educational ethnographic studies now emerged in the UK. Consequently, UK educational ethnography is considered closely related to the disciplinary traditions of sociology: particularly, the symbolic interactionism from the School of Chicago, the formal sociology connected to Goffman, the so-called 'new sociology of education' which combines phenomenological and Marxist analysis with and ethnomethodology (Woods & Hammersley, 1977; Delamont & Atkinson, 1980). At this time, the issues and

problems of biggest concern were the urban schools, especially secondary schools; and of particular focus within this context was social class as the central category as well as the difference from "the 'political arithmetic' tradition or British Sociology of education (which examined social class issues in terms of inputs, outputs and class mobility) to the study of what was occurring within the 'black box' of schooling" (Walford, 2008, 6). It is interesting to note that while the presence of different ethnic groups in British schools was very visible, the ethnic groups were not the focus of the research (Delamont & Atkinson, 1980: 145).

In Italy, the first ethnographic studies were developed by cultural anthropologists. For instance, around the end of the 1960's and beginning of the 1970's), Callari Galli and Harrison showed that "literacy, far from leading to educational equity through compulsory schooling, created instead a sharp divide between literate and illiterate citizens, and enveloped the latter with 'invisible walls', generating what the researchers defined as 'illiterate culture'" (Gobbo, 2011:152). During the following decade, disciplines such as Italian anthropology and education joined with USA and British ethnography in exploring the relationship between migrants, interculturality and schooling.

French educational ethnography has a more recent history that started from the 1980's within the Sociology of Education and the school of institutional analysis developed by Lapassade. In France, ethnographic research did not emerge as a result of a strong critique of mainstream sociology. Instead, the researchers cleverly made use of research conducted in England as a tool to legitimize their new approaches in the sociology of French education, without criticizing the 'founding fathers' (van Zanten, 1999: 50). As Raveaud and Draelants put it: "... since the 1980s there has been a profound renewal of theoretical analyses, research questions, objects, and methods, which led to a surge of interest for ethnography of education fueled by an exploration of the American and British literature in anthropology and ethnography" (2011:131).

In Denmark, ethnographic studies mainly began during the 1970's. The first studies, inspired by Neo-Marxist sociology, focused on the classroom with the purpose of exploring the connections between school and social control and stratification. Later, in the 1980's, these approaches were criticized for their social reproduction processes. This has led to research influenced by sociolinguistics, cultural studies, and social anthropology. As a result, the more recent ethnographic studies in Denmark have "focused directly on modes of communications, interactional genres and cultural forms produced in daily classroom interaction" (Anderson, Gulløv & Valentin, 2011: 197).

British and USA educational ethnography also influenced the first ethnographic attempts in Israel, particularly among researchers within a sociologic tradition. "Academic ethnographic research sought to give voice to and understand the diverse and conflicting cultures composing the relatively small Israeli society" (Shlasky, Alpert & Ben-Yehoshua, 2011: 269). At the end of the 1970's, ethnographic studies on schools and learning mainly focused on social integration problems were published.

Japan experienced an early development of ethnographic research due to the work of US educational anthropologists like Singleton (1967) and Rohlen (1983) who

influenced Japanese researchers such as Minoura (1984) and Ikeda (1985). Minoura and Ikeda have mainly focused on middle and high schools and in particular issues related to the teachers' perceptions of students, social control, and student culture.

In Latin America the development of ethnographic research did not start until the middle of the 1970's. At this time, most of the different Latin American studies were connected to interdisciplinary institutions in which educational research was developed: the Department of Educational research in Mexico, the Program for Educational Research in Chile, the Center of Research at the Pedagogical University in Colombia, and the Bolivian Center of Educational Action Research, among others (Rockwell, 1991: 173, 179). This phenomenon is worth noting because it accounts for the emergence of new experiences with "popular" education and with state projects regarding democratic education. This has triggered discussions with other forms of educational research, with Latin American political and sociological perspectives on the relationship between society and school, and with those psychological perspectives that have had a strong influence in education. The Latin American ethnographic field was developed within the British and USA frameworks of educational ethnography. Research problems mainly targeted urban and rural primary schools and their relationship to social and state structures. In Brazil in particular, the history of educational ethnography is linked to the development of multiculturalism in the USA. Back in the 1950's the work of USA anthropologists in the University of Bahia inspired the development of educational research and programs in a major center in Rio de Janeiro (Gusmao, 1997). This, in turn, inspired research in indigenous communities with a strong focus on the study of processes of socialization and, much later, of schooling.

It was not until the 1980's, however, that educational ethnography was recovered by groups of anthropologists, especially in Brazil, Mexico and Argentina (Rockwell, 1991: 174). In Argentina, a subfield of anthropology emerged that, with few exceptions, ignored links with the existing national anthropology and stressed its links with the emerging Latin American educational ethnography of the previous decade (Milstein et al, 2006). In Mexico during the late-1970's, there emerged researchers in educational ethnography as well as a significant body of research on everyday life in schools. This production has increased and includes both elementary and higher education. Most of this work is set within the context of the formal educational system. These studies utilize diverse theoretical frameworks, methodological stances, and ethnographic perspectives (Bertely and Corenstein, 1994; Piña Osorio, 1997). Further, in Colombia, the development of school ethnography has led to study the relationship between marginality, school and social contexts, between school and community, and between teachers and students. This has generated a sustained interest in classroom research focusing on the so called "school failure". In all cases, the Latin American context has been rural and urban primary schools (De Tezanos, 1983; Parra, 1980).

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