Significant currents of ethnographic research on education: majorities, minorities and migrations across the Americas

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Abstract

In this article we reflect upon differences and similarities among the seven articles included in this dossier, which represent consolidated lines of ethnographic research in five countries of the Americas. The contributions focus on aspects of the theme of the *XIII Simposio Interamericano de Etnografía de la Educación* (UCLA, 2013): "Majorities, minorities and migrants". Recent studies in these lines explore the ways in which diverse community and network resources, structural inequalities, and transnational realities impact educational processes both within and beyond formal schooling. Together they pose significant conceptual and methodological challenges for educational research.

Keywords

Ethnographic research – Comparative education – Diversity – Inequality – Migration.

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Importantes correntes de pesquisa etnográfica sobre educação: *maiorias, minorias e migrações através das Américas*

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Resumo

Neste artigo refletimos sobre diferenças e semelhanças entre os sete artigos incluídos neste dossiê, que representam linhas consolidadas de pesquisa etnográfica em cinco países das Américas. As contribuições concentram-se sobre aspectos do tema do XIII Simposio Interamericano de Etnografía de la Educación *(UCLA, 2003): "Maiorias, minorias e migrantes". Estudos recentes nessas linhas examinam de que modos os recursos diversos de comunidades e de redes, desigualdades estruturais e realidades transnacionais impactam os processos educacionais tanto dentro quanto além da escolaridade formal. Em conjunto, eles propõem importantes desafios conceituais e metodológicos para a pesquisa educacional.*

Palavras-chave

Pesquisa etnográfica – Educação comparada – Diversidade – Desigualdade – Migração.

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Conversations on ethnographies of education across the Americas

This dossier is an outcome of ongoing conversations that have taken place among scholars across the Americas in successive meetings of the *Simposio Interamericano de Etnografía de la Educación*, first held in 1989. We wish to dedicate this collection to the forty-year anniversary of the highly valued and influential multilingual journal *Educação e Pesquisa*.

The theme of the *XIII Simposio*, held in UCLA in September, 2013, was *Majorities, minorities and migrations in the Americas*.[1] It brought together over a hundred presenters who focused on the theme from different perspectives. One objective was to dissolve the distance among these fields of inquiry. We noted that *majorities* in one society become *minorities* when migrating to another country; *minorities* are rapidly becoming *regional majorities* and mainstream political actors; and *migrants* move back and forth from rural to urban regions and across national borders in pursuit of means of survival, and, quite often, in search of formal education. Through these movements, all populations redefine places of belonging, maintain links with the past and build new networks. In this issue, we chose to avoid a focus on educating specific *others* and rather consider how peoples everywhere educate one another outside of schools, increasingly participate in formal schooling, and when excluded, often assemble alternative educational experiences both within and beyond schooling.

In a keynote at the *VIII Simposio*, held at University of Indiana, Rockwell (2002) noted historical differences between ethnographies north and south of the Río Grande (Río Bravo). Latin American research, in tune with regional realities, privileged popular majorities and working classes, rural and indigenous sectors, and the work of teachers, and demanded public, State-funded schooling for all. In contrast, US ethnography contributed critical research reflecting other social realities, a focus on minorities, on issues of race, gender, ethnic and generational difference and discrimination, and, notably, on youth. Nearly fifteen years later, some of these lines have converged while new ones have emerged; research paths are crossing, references are sometimes being shared, and new conversations have become possible. However, there is still a wide gap between what scholars north and south know of current ethnographic research on education being done in each other's region. This collection hopes to build some bridges among them.

The three-day meeting in UCLA revealed the current vitality of ethnographic research on education in the hemisphere, sustained by teams of scholars who have crossed national and disciplinary borders in search of insights from the field. We welcomed the invitation by Denise Trento to submit a proposal to *Educação e Pesquisa*, and asked potential authors to reflect on the development of their current research projects and those of their students or close colleagues over the course of their careers. The result is a small but significant sample of strong lines of ethnographic research in five countries: Canada, USA, Mexico, Brazil and Argentina.

The thematic lines represented in this issue cover a wide range. All articles question a clear-cut classification of *majorities, minorities* and *migrants*. They introduce new distinctions, drawing on further understandings of social class reproduction, ambiguous citizenship, racialization and cultural hybridization. Several articles underscore the shifting "coupling of inequality and diversity" (Neufeld, Santillán and Cerletti), as the second term often obscures the first and the first deepens distinctions within the second. Some authors recall how growing social and economic inequalities have undercut opportunities to procure and sustain formal education and general wellbeing. All show that a simple model of multicultural

1- The Americas includes the Caribbean, as in the Haiti-Dominican Republic case; moreover, transcontinental migration has brought peoples from Asia, Africa and Europe into the Americas (Bartlett et al., Neufeld et al., Dlamini), so the space is truly global.

diversity will not do justice to the complexity of population dynamics and social structure in relation to cultural and educational opportunity and experience.

Together, authors in this collection uncover the interwoven processes involved in education. Issues of scale figure centrally, from the macro statistics of population growth and flows within and across borders to the fine-grained analysis of speech acts (Bartlett, Rodríguez and Oliveira; Collins). The perspective on social processes in education shows advances from the significant insights of reproduction theory—which demystified the liberal ideal of a neutral even playing ground for all—towards increasingly nuanced interactions among social class, recent educational policies and popular transformations (LeCompte and Ludwig; Bartlett, Rodríguez and Oliveira; Collins; Neufeld, Santillán and Cerletti). Schools are increasingly seen as spaces potentially inhabited and changed by particular peoples – Mayas in Guatemala or rural youth in Mexico – as they appropriate the know-how needed to manage in existing societies (LeCompte and Ludwig; Weiss; Bartlett, Rodríguez and Oliveira). The strength of ethnography lies in its ability to capture and describe some of these interwoven dimensions (Rockwell 2009).

The articles reveal stark contrasts between the stereotyped patterns of classroom instruction and out-of-school contexts where youth participate in significant social activities, including community action (LeCompte and Ludwig; Collins; Gomes and Faria; Dlamini). The cultural effectiveness of learning to weave within extended families in San Sebastian, learning to interview in Toronto, and learning soccer in Brazil, seems to lay bare the inequities of the segregating experiences and outcomes of formal schooling. Lest we too quickly assimilate these practices to the notion of "learning by doing", we are reminded (Gomes and Faria) that participants may call it "learning by doing nothing", that is, learning by just hanging around and observing others do. In the out-

of-school cases, learning was fundamentally linked to strong communal networking or social capital, and had tangible results. Much of this sort of learning also happens in classrooms, although our logocentric means of studying these settings has blinded us to such practices (Paradise 1991).

Everyday life is marked by the concerns of dealing with schooling, as is shown in studies done in places as far-flung as New York, Santo Domingo, Colombia, and Buenos Aires. Families become central actors in these processes, not only through direct educational practices but in the social construction of schooling as well. Most of the work families, undertake in getting the young ready for class and in absorbing the consequences of schooling has not been added up in the tally of educational costs. Why then do so many families still wager on children obtaining something other than (devaluing) credentials from formal schooling, even to the extent of taking on the risks of migration? (LeCompte and Ludwig; Weiss; Bartlett, Rodríguez and Oliveira; Neufeld, Santillán and Cerletti). A possible answer is that students are able to take their outside lives into schools, and transform their everyday experience there in ways that contribute to their *subjectivation*, that is, to their reflexive development as persons (Weiss). However, this is not a guaranteed outcome, and the social ties that support communal learning are not always sufficient to manage learning the complexities of an alien society and educational institution (Dlamini).

Ongoing research in this line explores the ways that community and network resources, structural inequalities and transnational realities impact the education processes within formal schooling. Two articles (Collins; LeCompte and Ludwig) focus on the permeability of classrooms, noting how other ways of speaking and learning appear and are filtered, accepted or rejected, by the usual instructional patterns. Yet this may be onesided this dossier centers on students, families and communities as actors, missing are other significant lines of research

that shed light on the challenges teachers face in dealing with diversity and inequality (also presented at the XIII Simposio).

The studies collectively pose strong questions to educators generally. The youth of majorities, minorities and migrants are increasingly being recruited through a series of mechanisms – regulations, free meals, stipends, NGOs – set in place to keep them in school. Though responding to international human rights mandates, some of these mechanisms engender internal discrimination, particularly as policies install school ranking and increase the cost of access to quality education (Neufeld, Santillán and Cerletti; Bartlett, Rodriguez and Oliveira). In the face of persistent social and economic inequalities, the defense of universal public schooling seems imperative. Further work on the actual cultures and practices of schooling from a comparative stance must be done to engage in this discussion. The response cannot be cast in abstract terms: it involves a deeper understanding of just what particular schools do, as Hymes proposed long ago (1980); where, when and how they work, how they include and/or exclude different groups, and where they are headed given present educational policies and trends. This requires prolonged situated ethnographic research, such as is developed in these studies.

In a methodological vein, the range of studies presented in this issue is broad: Some are based on long-term localized fieldwork; others offer multi-sited and multi-temporal comparisons. Weiss has grounded ethnographic analyses in the hermeneutic tradition to understand the meanings young people find in their school experiences, while Bartlett and coauthors have used a comparative perspective to contrast the experiences of migration in several countries. Collins integrates scales, addressing language policy issues in the light of detailed analysis of equivalent verbal interactions that reveal strong distinctions between accepted and stigmatized migrant children. Neufeld, Santillán and Cerletti examine the "discursive

front" erected between schools and families that naturalizes educational "problems" and attributes them to cultural diversity understood as deficit. LeCompte and Ludwig have relied on classic participant observation to produce thick descriptions of children learning – or failing to learn – in diverse contexts. Gomes and Faria reflect on experience in the field and urge taking seriously what participants have to say. Dlamini engages youth in research, giving them the tools to inquire and document, verbally or with photography, their interpretations of their worlds.

Of particular note are the conceptual tools and props that back the research reported in these articles. All authors engage in the discussion of multiple classical and critical theories, and also suggest new fruitful conceptual paths to continue reflexive fieldwork and research. There is both confluence and tension among theoretical references that were used separately in past decades, including such constants as Bourdieu, Foucault, de Certeau, and Freire. The State has come back on stage, understood no longer as an "apparatus" but rather as a set of processes and relations of power that generate multiple "state effects" (Trouillot cited by Collins and by Neufeld, Santillán and Cerletti). Attention is given to the active appropriation of cultural and social resources by different minorities and migrants, through multiple itineraries that do not correspond with prescribed trajectories. The outcomes of the educational processes described in each study are not predestined.

The concept of learning has become detached from the parameters of institutional evaluation. In line with diverse theories of (Hymes, Lave, Ingold and others) the process of learning is understood as situated sociocultural and discursive activity, with a subjective dimension that cannot be reduced to individual cognitive factors, but rather involves all experience, in the Vygotskian sense, from perception and skill to emotion and expression. Language has become disassembled and the multiple language varieties spoken in

communities become assets or obstacles in the context of particular situations and institutions (Blommaert, cited by Collins).

In sum, rather than illustrating clear-cut schools of research, these lines of ethnographic work from different parts of the hemisphere move down paths that are sometimes parallel and sometimes tangential, occasionally crossing and making connections. They draw on a common methodological tradition of ethnography, with variations. We know from comparing citations used by all the Simposio authors that they share many common references to international theorists and to educational anthropology published in the United States, although the Latin American ethnographers also cite more work published in Europe as well as many works published by colleagues in Latin America (Anderson-Levitt 2013). Distinct historical, social and political contexts have shaped certain research questions as well as some theoretical preferences (Anderson-Levitt 2014). Also notable is the historical dimension of the research reported in these articles, which reflects the changing social and political realities of current times (Rockwell, 2011). This new context may allow scholars to further build on connections to understand one another across borders.

It is easier to make connections and to come to appreciate one another's work when we meet in person, learn about the differences in context, and come to trust one another's judgments about what counts as important and interesting research. The Simposio Interamericano is a place where making connections is encouraged and supported. Thus we urge continuing participation in future Simposios that will take place in various countries, North and South, during the coming years. A world community of researchers in Anthropology and Education is emerging (Anderson-Levitt 2011) and, like the multilingual articles in this dossier, face-to-face meetings nourish that community and help it grow.

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