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Anthropology of Education: an introduction

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ABSTRACT – Anthropology of Education: an introduction. What is the anthropology of education, and what does it contribute to the study of education? Those questions orient this special issue of *Educação & Realidade*. Anthropologies of education vary around the world (Anderson-Levitt, 2012a). Indeed, as Elsie Rockwell (2002, p. 3) notes, "[...] the analytic categories used to construct ethnographic texts are not autonomous; they are rooted in the societies in which they are first used, and they reflect actual ways of constructing difference in those societies". Nonetheless, we might identify some fundamental commitments that have evolved over time.
Keywords: **Anthropology of Education. Ethnography. Social Theory.**

RESUMO – Antropologia da Educação: introdução. O que é antropologia da educação e qual é sua contribuição para o estudo da educação? Estas perguntas orientam este número especial da revista *Educação & Realidade*. As antropologias de educação variam ao redor do mundo (Anderson-Levitt, 2012a). Aliás, conforme Elsie Rockwell (2002, p. 3) observa, "[...] as categorias analíticas usadas para elaborar textos etnográficos não são autônomas; estão enraizados nas sociedades em que são usadas primeiro e refletem os modos concretos de nelas construir a diferença". No entanto, podemos identificar alguns compromissos fundamentais que evoluíram ao longo do tempo.
Palavras-chave: **Antropologia da Educação. Etnografia. Teoria Social.**

As educational anthropologist Harry Wolcott (2011, p. 98-99) writes, the following elements characterize early work in the field:

- they studied societies different from their own;
- they conducted fieldwork for a long period of time, frequently returning to pursue further work or a restudy;
- they were able to converse with the local people in the native language;
- their responsibility, as they saw it, was to observe and record, not to change or attempt to improve conditions as observed;
- their work was comparative, with a conscious effort to identify dominant themes in the *culture* of their people: their ways of thinking and living;
- they studied specific groups and were reluctant to generalize beyond what they observed first-hand;
- it was not customary to pass judgment on the ways of life of the people they were studying or to offer recommendations for change or improvement.

There have been debates over these initial commitments: for example, many contemporary anthropologists of education do research in their own society, and most feel an obligation to put their work in the service of positive social change. However, the other core commitments largely persist.

While the contours of the field have been heavily debated, there are some orienting principles. Anthropology of education is rooted in anthropology's commitments to holism, the culture concept, cultural relativism, the value of cross-cultural comparison, and social theory. First, holism signals the effort to consider humans across time as well as the refusal to compartmentalize contemporary experiences. The commitment to holism leads anthropologists to draw on social theory from a range of disciplines, including sociology, religious studies, philosophy, politics, and economics. As McDermott and Raley (2011, p. 34) explain, "[...] all ethnography reaches for a portrait of everything at stake in the details of people's lives. Usual approaches to education – psychology, economics, sociology, even history – deliver important slices, but anthropologists seek the full schedule of struggles that make every moment significant, potentially treacherous, and likely political".

Second, the concept of culture emphasizes what anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973) famously called the *webs of significance* in which humans are suspended. Anthropologists have debated this concept (Erickson, 2011; Anderson-Levitt, 2012b), moving from a static notion to a more emergent conceptualization, captured in the phrase *cultural production*. In short, culture is something people do, rather than something people have; or, as anthropologist Brian Street argued, culture is a *verb* (Street 1993). Further, anthropologists have also emphasized that meaning should not be divorced from structures of inequality and questions of power differentials. Thus culture, as McDermott

and Varenne (2006, p. 8) suggest, can be fruitfully thought of as "[...] the on-going process of humans creatively adapting to each other and to social structures and political and economic institutions under both perduring and emergent circumstances"; it entails a constant *figuring out* of social interactions in larger political economic fields (Varenne; Koyama, 2011; Varenne, 2019). Ethnography attends to the "[...] symbolic forms, patterns, discourses, and practices that help to form" everyday life; it also studies "[...] how experience is entrained in the flow of contemporary history" (Willis; Trondman 2002, p. 395).

Third, cultural relativism indicates an effort to understand a culture or group on its own terms, rather than using the standards of one's own culture or beliefs. As Faulstich Orellana (2020, p. 1) notes, "Ethnography, with all its limitations – made evident in its formation through the initial colonialist encounters of the Western and non-Western world – has as its strongest impulse the quest to see and understand 'others' on their own terms and to step out of our own viewpoints in order to do so". Indeed, comparison of one's own perspectives and beliefs with those of others is fundamental to the anthropological endeavor, and it contributes to the effort to identify how particular groups of people meet universal needs.

Finally, anthropology recognizes the role of social theory "[...] as a precursor, medium, and outcome of ethnographic study and writing" (Willis; Trondman 2002, p. 396). Social theory prompts topics of research and provides the conceptual framework that guides studies; the evidence of the study is used to refine social theory, making theoretical contributions the outcome of such studies. Rather than aim for the statistical generalization of quantitative research, anthropological studies generate social theories that can be transferred to other places and times.

Anthropology of education also adopts from anthropology its commitment to ethnographic methods, which include long-term engagement; participant observation of humans in natural settings; and formal and informal interviewing of various sorts. As Paul Willis and Mats Trondman (2002, p. 394) write in their *Manifesto for Ethnography*, ethnography is "[...] a family of methods involving direct and sustained social contact with agents and of richly writing up the encounter, respecting, recording, representing at least partly in its own terms the irreducibility of human experience. Ethnography is the disciplined and deliberate witness-cum-recording of human events". The method values experiential learning through participation. Ethnography, as Pierre Bourdieu explained, produces "[...] a *corporeal knowledge* that provides a practical comprehension of the world quite different from the act of conscious decoding that is normally designated by the idea of comprehension" (Bourdieu, 1999, p. 135).

The anthropology of education dedicates itself to the study of education. Yet what does that entail? Most obviously, education includes schooling. Contemporary anthropology of education may focus on top-

ics such as education and multiculturalism, educational pluralism, culturally relevant pedagogy, or the mismatch between ways of knowing valued in school and those valued at home or in different communities. School ethnographies often demonstrate how inequalities are produced or mediated through everyday life in schools. However, since its earliest days, anthropologists of education have considered non-formal and informal education as well. Indeed, much of the early work in the field focused on enculturation, asking how children learn a culture, or socialization, which might be defined as the process of learning social norms and ideologies. Thus, anthropology of education is committed to a very broad notion of education, one which the ethnomethodologist Herve Varenne (2007, p. 1562) defines as "[...] continued efforts to change both oneself and one's consociates through often difficult collective deliberations".

The commitment to education extends beyond schooling into the realm of policy, policymaking and its implementation. Policy, as a course of action created by individuals, is inherently a cultural production. Anthropological views of education policy include an array of actors: school districts, staff, administrators, parents, teachers, and students, all with competing demands and intersecting interests. According to Hamann and Vandeyar (2017, p. 45) "[...] the task of the anthropologist of educational policy implementation is to identify and analyze the extant problem diagnoses, pursued strategies, presumed structures, and imagined better worlds of those who make/perform educational systems or to gather and scrutinize the *is's* and *be's* and *should's*". In studying education policy and its implementation, anthropologists consider the intertwined roles of all actors.

The articles in this special issue highlight state-of-the-art conceptual and empirical work in the anthropology of education. They demonstrate school ethnographies and attention to education, writ large. The pieces consider the cultural production of inequalities linked to gender (Campbell Galman and Mallozi), race/ethnicity (Anzures), nationality and relationship to the nation-state (Oliveira, Anzures, Koyama, Borns), migration status (Borns, Oliveira, Koyama), language and literacy (Anzures, Borns, Nunes Macedo), age (Mayorga, Anzures), and religion (Borns). The articles in this special issue demonstrate the range of research methods in this exciting field: they showcase the two core methods of interviews (all) and long-term participant observation (all), as well as innovative approaches including transnational care constellations (Oliveira), discourse analysis (Mayorga; Campbell Galman and Mallozi), network analysis (Koyama), humanizing, participatory research (Harwood and Murray), and Aboriginal research protocols (Harwood and Murray), among others. The articles offer prime examples of how theory and concepts such as literacy or *letramento* (Nunes Macedo), culture of bureaucratic accountability (Anzures), transworlding (Koyama), or civic disjunctures (Borns) precede, shape, and are produced by ethnographic study. They demonstrate several hallmarks of the best contemporary anthropology of education, including the value of reflexivity, the link between epistemology and research methods,

the importance of going beyond self-reported data to include observations, the need to simultaneously consider cultural webs of meaning and structures of inequality, the difficult work of developing a cultural analysis, and a commitment to equity. They also ask surprising questions about human experience, such as how popular culture shapes gender and vocation (Campbell Galman and Mallozi), how supposedly progressive educational reforms get derailed or diluted (Anzures), how schools insist on culturally arbitrary knowledge forms (Anzures, Nunes Macedo), the cultural politics of knowledge production (Nunes Macedo), how collaborative research can foster equity (Harwood and Murray), how interpretations of history inform political engagement (Mayorga), how youth use a community-based educational space to build panethnic coalitions and develop their own agency (Borns), how migration trends are reformulating fundamental family relationships and educational experiences (Oliveira), and how refugees use social media to refigure their learning and challenge normative educational practices (Koyama).

In short, the articles in this special issue exemplify quality anthropological studies of education that raise new questions, develop incisive conceptual frameworks, use innovative methods, address critical topics, and generate new insights about the human experience of education. We hope you enjoy them.

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