

Interrogating and Innovating Comparative and International Education Research

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Symposium statement: Decolonizing methodology by invoking local voices

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My current work is informed by my interdisciplinary social science training in international education policy and quantitative policy analysis from the Harvard Graduate School of Education, in addition to my experience working with non-profit organizations and government agencies, serving as a practitioner, trainer, and consultant. All of my research questions, design, and interpretation are deeply informed by time I have spent conducting “field” work and systematically gathering local insights from communities and schools. In addition to writing academic papers, I always look for opportunities to present my findings in the form of talks, policy briefs, blog posts, videos, and workshops to policy groups and practitioners such as the World Bank and UNICEF, in addition to local NGOs, who are interested in understanding how to improve education and health outcomes for the children in the communities with which they work, especially the most disenfranchised.

In my research agenda, I have sought to understand factors that influence educational decisions for children, families, and service providers such as teachers in developing contexts. Motivated by interviews with families, teachers, and children, I have focused on understanding the importance of basic needs in making these decisions, drawing from Maslow’s (1943) hierarchy of needs with the idea that one is less likely to be able to focus on higher-order functions until one’s fundamental needs such as hunger and safety are satisfied. In particular, in my work in rural India, I have focused on how the provision of basic needs through improvements in school sanitation, transportation, and clothing can influence educational outcomes in India, specifically for girls and historically disadvantaged socioeconomic caste groups. To examine these issues, I apply empirical statistical methods using large-scale panel data collected from numerous sources, in addition to drawing from insights collected from interviews and participant observation.

Look, listen, learn. When working with communities, whether they be households or schools, beginning by spending non-contingent time with people and in their environments allows me as a researcher to better understand the local context and to build relationships and trust. I observe my surroundings and how people live their lives, I listen to words and to body language. This helps to shape my research questions and ensure that they are relevant to people’s lives (and not just for academic discourse). I have also found that people are more likely to open up to me if they feel like I care: people don’t care how much you know until they know how much you care. As researchers, we must remember that “human subjects” are first and foremost humans, and therefore we must always respect and consider one’s humanity when approaching work that involves others’ lives.

I have found that using quantitative data and associated empirical methods helps give a sense of what may be happening on average across populations, and then using more community-grounded qualitative data collection and

analysis helps to give more of a deeper understanding of why we might be seeing certain things in the quantitative data (or open up questions as to why certain things may or may not be appearing). Indeed, the qualitative data often help shape questions that I then focus on in quantitative surveys.

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